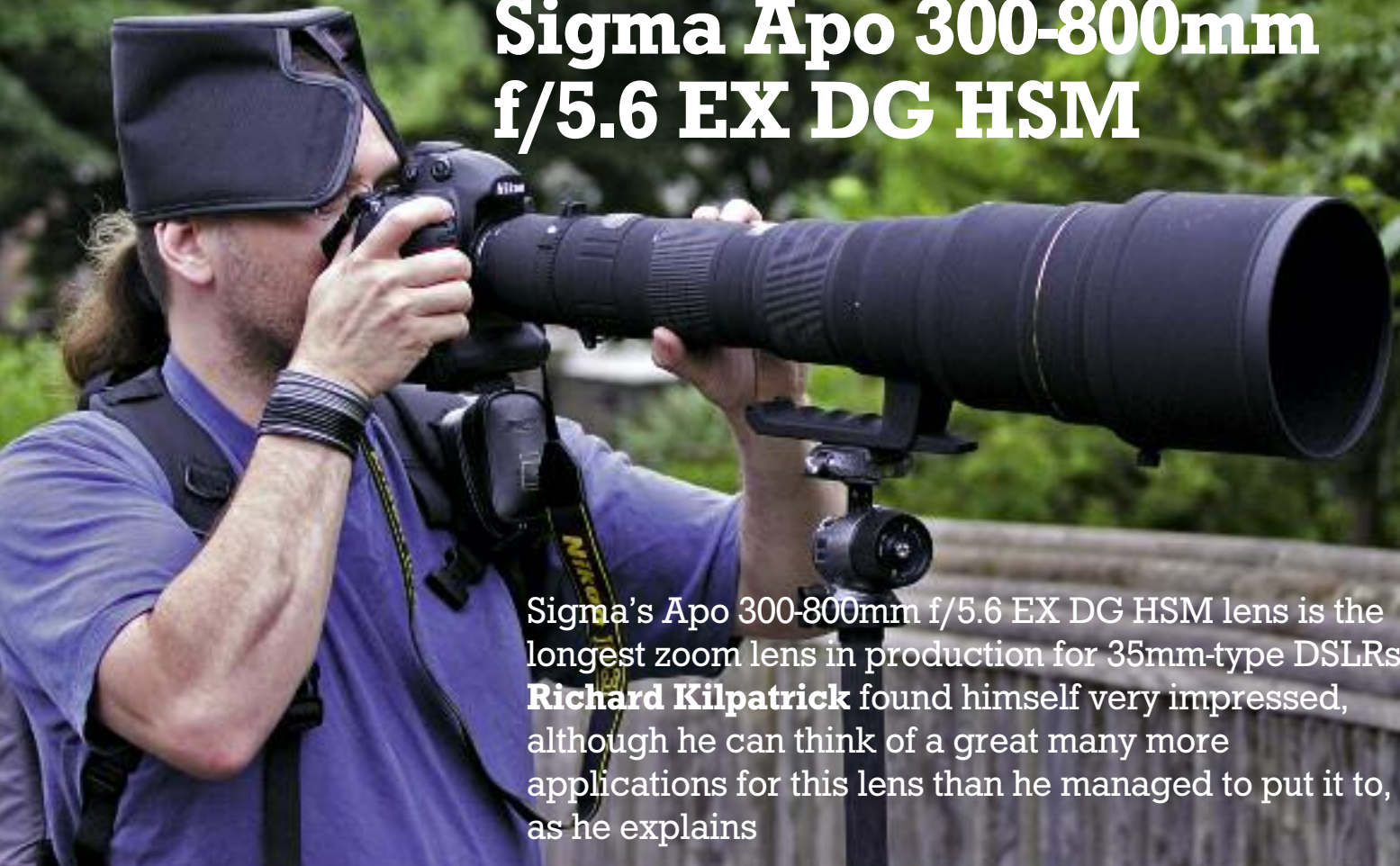


# Sigma Apo 300-800mm f/5.6 EX DG HSM



Sigma's Apo 300-800mm f/5.6 EX DG HSM lens is the longest zoom lens in production for 35mm-type DSLRs. **Richard Kilpatrick** found himself very impressed, although he can think of a great many more applications for this lens than he managed to put it to, as he explains

**N**ot many people know this, but Sigma once made a white lens. It was manual focus, had an epic zoom range, from 350-1200mm, and weighed 11Kg. Made for 35mm film cameras, it cost £4795 in the days when you could buy a fairly nice new car for that sort of money, and is understandably somewhat rare.

In these enlightened times, Sigma's lens range does not need to reach such epic heights (in fact, its most costly lens is a mere 500mm, albeit at an astonishing f/2.8, and again, it costs about as much as a new car) although the affectionately-termed 'Sigmonster' 300-800mm f/5.6 is similarly epic in length – in fact it is the longest zoom lens in production for 35mm cameras - while also being considerably lighter and easier to use.

Due to Sigma's platform-agnostic approach, you can order it for the Four Thirds mount, which means a 1600mm equivalent f/5.6 lens, with 20ft minimum focus for £5500 (although at street prices, there's a fair chance you might get the E3 body too at that price).

It all starts with the usual gear lust - wandering around Focus on Imaging, admiring the 16.5Kg, £14,000, 200-500mm f/2.8 Apo and wishing you were the sort of photographer that could justify owning such a device (you could be: join the armed forces or the police). Discussing which lenses are due for review. Hefting a newly-bought high-speed Nikon DSLR, and being optimistic about glass. Before you know it, you've got 6kg of

lens in front of you and a sudden realisation that you need to put it to good use!

A trip to the Everglades in Florida was not the occasion. After a practice run at Edinburgh Zoo, it was apparent that the Sigma 300-800mm f/5.6 Apo EX DG HSM is a very usable, wieldy lens for the focal length (and being a perfectly normal shade of black, doesn't attract too many of the, 'Are you a photographer?' questions).

With the high ISO performance of the D3, it could even be used hand held - but it's a tad large to fit in the cabin baggage on a flight, and you wouldn't want to risk stowing it in the hold, for fear of it being stolen.

Common sense prevailed, and I attempted to work with the much less expensive 120-400mm and a 2x converter - and of course, everything that could be taken without the converter was absolutely fine. Wildlife, however, has a habit of moving about, and with the reduced apertures, longer exposures and manual focus entailed by the use of the 2x converter, I missed many shots I would have captured with the Sigma 300-800.

One of the other considerations with the 300-800mm is that testing it on the D3 really doesn't give a valid perspective on 'modern' approaches to photography. After a few years of APS-C sensors, photographers are beginning to forget that 300mm is 'moderate', and 800mm is 'quite long' - especially when the benefits of faster lenses make the idea of something that operates at that old lens' f/11



390mm, ISO 2000, 1/640, f/6.1



quite unusual.

In fact, used on a Sigma SD14, the 300-800 becomes a stunning 510-1360mm f/5.6 equivalent - combined with the Foveon sensor's sharpness, you're looking at something akin to an astronomical instrument at decidedly down-to-earth overall costs, while on something like the Fuji S5 Pro, the 300-800 is a very practical 450-1200mm equivalent.

While full frame sensors are a boon for social and portrait photographers looking for narrow DoF, there's still a lot to be said for the smaller sensor when you're looking at longer focal lengths.

When you hand your local Sigma dealer around £4700 (street price - SRP is £5499) you'll be given something which is practically unique among lenses currently on the market. The build quality is the usual solid construction you expect from an EX DG series lens, with a very robust tripod mount, and a substantial - although perhaps not suitable for baggage-handler treatment - case.

The front element is of course, immense (leading to a lens diameter of 156.5mm); filters are fitted internally near the rear of the lens, and are 46mm diameter. A polariser and a clear filter are provided, in a rotating carrier. Focus and zoom are internal, and a large flock-lined lens hood attaches with semi-bayonet, semi-screw securing. The lens cap is a large velcro pouch.

The lens is compatible with the Sigma (and other) teleconverters, though AF is dis-



An open-air enclosure offers some chances to get close to the small-clawed otters in Edinburgh Zoo



The moon, using tripod, 2x converter for 1600mm length and remote release with mirror lockup. You simply cannot fault the result this lens gives

abled with Sigma models. This effectively means that, with an APS-C camera, you can enjoy a 2400mm equivalent f/11 lens for under £5000, while with the Four Thirds mount you're looking at an operating range from 600mm f/5.6 to 3200mm f/11 from one lens, and one converter. Astronomers with Olympus E3s - why are you still reading this; you should be ordering now!

Having worked with the lens for a while, but finding opportunities to use it somewhat elusive, I intend to continue having one as part of my kit. It's a flexible and uncommon bit of hardware that, if you're given the right assignments, will pay for itself. Rather than hiring, owning one gives you the chance to take some astounding images - cityscapes with wildlife, covert 'spy' shots (automotive magazines pay good money for prototype car

shots), sports (with a good tripod for those panning shots) - the range of applications for this lens is huge. Background and foreground bokeh is smooth and non-distracting, and the lens is sharp fully open.

More impressive is that the AF is fast; the zoom control is light and precise, with no creep; and the lens well enough balanced on the mount that, with a centre-ball head, it can be left aiming down and locked in place without unbalancing the tripod. The HSM AF and solid zoom eliminate the pantomime that using earlier manual telephotos entailed, and a good panning head, or a gimbal like the Wimberly, will make tripod use a pleasure, allowing all effort to go on composition.

Compared to the film-based pioneers with the slow, massively expensive long telephotos of 30 years ago, modern photogra-

phers with an eye on the distant subject have never had it so good.

There was a time when lenses like this were only found in the rarefied world of photographers employed by Reuters and other large organisations. However, with pro DSLR bodies hitting this sort of money, and with the overall adjustment of income and cost, this isn't as expensive a proposition as it would have been in the 1970s/80s.

With easier access to newsdesks and libraries, there's a good case for owning this sort of glass for the serious freelance. I'd even argue that, for those considering higher-end DSLRs for full-frame work with an eye to the overall possibilities of stock/news photography, it would be worth subsidising the expense of this lens by choosing a smaller sensor camera such as the Nikon D300 or even the Olympus E3. Combined with the surprisingly good results with the 2x converter, the unheard of (from a completely standard configuration) equivalent of 3200mm f/11 is feasible and usable.

As an additional interest - for various reasons, I've opted to get this lens in Nikon fit for the D3 - had I chosen a Sigma fit for my SDs, I would have had the option of removing the IR filter and attempting astrophotography; a similar route would be open to me by using the Fuji IS-Pro, which is designed to capture IR and UV light. **f2**

### **Sigma 300-800mm f/5.6 EX DG HSM**

- 18 elements in 16 groups
- 8.2 - 3.1° angle of view
- 9 diaphragm blades
- Minimum aperture f/32
- Min focus 600cm
- Max magnification 1:6.9
- Filter size 46mm
- Diameter 156.5mm
- Length 544mm
- Weight 5880g
- £5500

[www.sigma-imaging-uk.com](http://www.sigma-imaging-uk.com)