

New Manfrotto Tripods

Tripods: Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em! A critical piece of equipment for any photographer or spotting scope user, the tripod is also one of the most regularly griped-about instruments. A common complaint about Manfrotto-by-Bogen tripods is that they were not designed for birders. True. They were designed for photographers. But they have arguably been the best around for birding. A range of offerings has fit most birder's needs quite effectively.

Have any of the Bogen/Manfrotto models been perfect? Definitely not, but I have always been more than satisfied with their various products. It seems to me, however, that some folks have made Bogen-bashing into a new Olympic sport. Personally, I have never felt that this criticism was warranted. A review in the May/June 2005 *Birding* (pp. 312–315) by Frank Gallo does a good job of summarizing some of the complaints about previous tripod offerings, but I found the article's value to be somewhat limited as it failed to review newer offerings from Bogen/Manfrotto

that would have addressed many of the author's complaints (such as the clamp-locking mechanism of the 3021 legs).

I have used the Bogen/Manfrotto 3021 legs and 3130 head for years and have been completely satisfied. The head could be a bit smaller and lighter, but I have always been happy with its range of motion and smooth operation. The legs have served me well, as weight is not an issue for me ("Not yet" comments are understood). The set-up

is stable, the angle of the legs is adjustable (for the windiest condition when a wider footprint is helpful and for when I am sitting down), and the clamplocks for each section are quick and efficient. And my tripod has most certainly taken a considerable beating and yet keeps on ticking (pun intended).

As I said before, however, previous offerings from Bogen/Manfrotto have not been perfect, and were not designed with birding in mind, so I was excited by the opportunity to take a look at the new line of birding-inspired tripods and heads now being offered by Manfrotto. (By the way, the use of the name Bogen has been dropped. It's just Manfrotto now—although it is still the Bogen Imaging Corporation.)

Two different heads are offered with four different choices of legs for a total of eight kits. The lightweight 700RC2 (hereafter 700) head and the heavy-duty 701RC2 (hereafter 701) video-style head are added to two versions each of lightweight carbon-fiber and heavy-duty aluminum legs. The 700 head has been available since 2002, and the 701

head was introduced in 2005. Meanwhile, the legs have undergone some minor changes.

Heads

The 3130 head has been the standard for birding for some time. It is reasonably priced; it has smooth, fluid motions on both the vertical and horizontal planes; and it uses an easy-yet-secure quick-release plate. However, it is bulky, weighing 2.2 lbs. Other issues with the head include the small size of the brass locking lever and the potential for wear in the seat holding the quick-release plate. Being the most



Both the 055 series (left) and the 190 series (right) are available in either carbon-fiber (left) or aluminum (right). The shorter 190 series is perfect for traveling or long treks, but needs to be coupled with an angled scope for most users. © Derek Lovitch.

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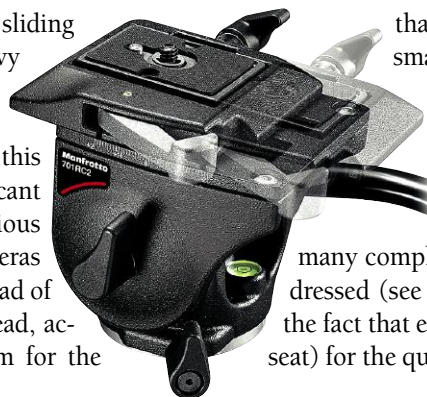
popular head for birders to use with spotting scopes (and the head that I have always used), this is the model that I will use as the basis for comparison with Manfrotto's two new heads, the 700 and 701.

The 701 head is made for heavier weights, such as large telephoto camera lenses. It is designed to carry a weight of 3.3–8.8 lbs. Since the heaviest of the most popular spotting scopes are well within the weight limit of the 700 (1.1–5.5 lbs.), most birders will not be interested in toting around the extra 11.2 oz. of the 701 (1.8 lbs. vs. 1.1 lbs for the 700, although note that both are considerably lighter than the 2.2 lbs of the 3130).

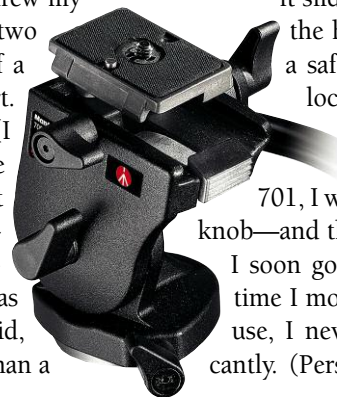
If you are looking to carry heavy loads—such as telephoto lenses—and need an extremely stable base, then the 701 is worth considering. A built-in counterbalance spring combined with a sliding top allows for better balance with heavy equipment. The 701 pans and tilts very smoothly. Used with most spotting scopes, however, the extra bulk and weight of this head seem unnecessary, not offering significant additional benefits for the scope-user (serious digiscopers using heavy adapters and cameras may also want to consider the extra max-load of the 701). My biggest problem with this head, actually, is the lack of a locking mechanism for the quick-release plate—which drops into the seat, as on the 3130. The quick-release plate is held into the seat by only a single lever. I quickly learned the drawback: When birding one morning with the 701, I threw my tripod and scope over my shoulder, took two steps, and then heard the sickening sound of a spotting scope crashing down onto frozen dirt. *Thud!* I still do not know how it happened (I can only assume that I somehow hit the release lever as I put the scope over my shoulder), but I have a cracked eyecup on my favorite eyepiece to remind me of my carelessness. (Definitely a credit to the Leica scope, by the way, as the only damage that a five-foot fall onto solid, frozen ground resulted in was nothing more than a cracked eyecup; the optics were fine). Carelessness on my part or not, the lack of a back-up locking mechanism turned me off to the use of this head.



The **701 head** is designed for carrying heavier loads between 3.3 and 8.8 lbs. Image courtesy of © Bogen Imaging Corporation.



A **sliding top** allows the user to easily balance a heavy load, such as a telephoto lens. Image courtesy of © Bogen Imaging Corporation.



The three-prong knobs of the **3130 head** are replaced by single-pronged knobs to reduce bulk. The quick-release plate is locked into place by tightening the top knob. Image courtesy of © Bogen Imaging Corporation.

Since I have used the 3130 for so long, I wanted to get used to the 700 before I began to write this review. Therefore, after a short time with the 701, I switched to using the 700 day in and day out until I felt comfortable using it and could objectively compare it to the 3130.

The 700 weighs in at only 1.1 lbs, a considerable reduction in weight from the 3130's 2.2 lbs. Sleeker construction of the head, smaller knobs, and a seemingly lighter-weight metal combine for this improvement. If weight is your primary concern (travel, long walks, and the like), then the 700 may be the answer. During a long day in the field, or if toting luggage, this weight savings is valuable. And it certainly fits much better in one's carry-on than the bulky 3130. The minimum advertised price is two dollars less than the 3130 (\$72.95 vs. \$74.95), which is small enough to be of little consequence.

The angle of the arm (handle) of the 700 is much easier to adjust and secure than in the 3130. My favorite innovation, however, is the completely redesigned seating mechanism. While many complaints about the 3130 head were easily addressed (see sidebar, p. 76), one abiding problem was the fact that eventually the edges of the indentation (the seat) for the quick-release plate would scuff and wear, occasionally to the point that the quick-release plate could jiggle, even when locked in. The quick-release plate is no longer dropped into the seat, but instead it slides into a dovetail-shaped groove in the rear of the head and is retained by a sturdy metal clip. As a safety precaution, the quick-release plate is also locked into place by a threaded knob on the side of the head. Especially after my experience with the lack of a locking mechanism on the 701, I was more than a bit paranoid about whether this knob—and the small screw that it controls—would loosen. I soon got into the habit of tightening the knob every time I moved my tripod, but in two months of constant use, I never found that this lever loosened up significantly. (Personally, I will still worry about it—especially with wear over the long run. Can the set screw get stripped?)

As I mentioned before, if weight is a primary concern, then the 700 is a good

choice. However, even after getting used to the 700 in the field, I found that I prefer using the old 3130. I find the movement of the 3130 to be more fluid (except in very cold weather, in which either can stiffen up), especially on the vertical plane, which I find to be a bit jerky with the 700. I prefer the large three-prong knobs of the 3130 to the small single-pronged knobs of the 700, especially when using thick gloves. I find the 3130 easier to move, adjust, and lock using only one hand, with my eye fixed in the scope's eyepiece scanning the water for flyby Dovekies. The difficulty that I have blindly locating and adjusting the knob at the base of the head for horizontal movement (along with the smaller-sized knob and less-fluid motion) makes it more difficult to follow a small speck skimming the ocean's surface during a strong nor'easter. Furthermore, a left-handed birding friend found the 700 particularly difficult to manipulate.

Legs

There are four leg assemblies to choose from. The 055 series is the taller version. The 190 series is great for portability and packability, and will be useful for angled scopes. But even with the center column fully extended (which for balance reasons is not recommended), anyone over about 5'7" will not be able to use this tripod comfortably with a straight scope. All four leg options are three-sectioned, a compromise between stability and portability.

Personally, I have never felt that I needed to spend the money on a carbon-fiber tripod just for its lighter weight. (I know, not yet!) However, after using the 055MFV for a while, I was definitely spoiled by this featherweight. In ad-

Table. Summary of Manfrotto's New Tripod Models.

	190V	055V	190MFV	055MFV
Closed length	21 inches	24 inches	21 inches	24 inches
Height with center column compressed	46 inches	54 inches	44 inches	52 inches
Height with center column fully extended	57 inches	68 inches	55 inches	67 inches
Weight	4.19 lbs.	5.07 lbs.	3.53 lbs.	4.41 lbs.

Note: All measurements are for leg assembly only, not including a head.

dition to the significantly reduced weight of using carbon fiber (instead of aluminum) for the legs themselves, the metal leg-lock assembly has been replaced with a strong, but lightweight, polycarbonate material. This new generation of carbon-fiber tripods is also a little less expensive than Manfrotto's previous offerings.

But when I attempted to use the 055MFV while sea-watching during a nor'easter, I longed for the stability of the heavier aluminum models (weight equals stability). There was more vibration in the wind, and there was certainly the chance that, top-heavy with a scope, the whole system might topple over. After seeing a friend's carbon-fiber tripod "take a digger" at the Lakewatch at Michigan's Whitefish Point during strong winds, I have lacked confidence in using a carbon-fiber tripod as my primary tripod. But for long walks and travel, lightweight carbon-fiber legs can't be beat.

On both carbon-fiber models, the lever at the top of the leg that allows you to adjust the leg angle is easier to use, especially with gloves on, than the lever on the new aluminum legs—the same as on the old 3021 legs that these are meant to replace. (My biggest complaint about Bogen/Manfrotto? Their product naming system—and therefore their catalog—are not user-friendly. For example, different product numbers often represent only a different color of paint and their catalog doesn't always make this readily apparent.)

The new 055V aluminum legs have not changed much from the 3021. The biggest difference is that they are now green. The lever of the leg-lock assembly is slightly smaller now, reducing excess weight marginally. It is also smoother and quieter when opening and closing. This is certainly an improvement, however minor it may be. And admittedly, the green color does look better.

Maintenance Tips

I think most of the realistic complaints about Bogen tripods could be eliminated by some very minor preventative maintenance. Put the included allen wrench in a safe place (I store it in my car's glove compartment) and occasionally tighten the nuts and screws on the leg locking mechanism, before they loosen enough to affect the tripod's performance in the field. A squirt of WD40 or a drop of mineral oil (if you're like me and avoid using chemicals whenever possible) on any levers, springs, screws, etc., once or twice a year usually keeps things moving smoothly, especially in tight places like the brass locking lever for the quick-release plate. And the number one complaint about the Bogen/Manfrotto quick-release plate is that the screws (which attach the base plate to the scope) loosen. I have a simple, \$2 solution to this problem: a small tube of medium-strength Lock-Tite or Threadlock. A few drops on each screw, and your scope will not loosen for months. Using the medium-strength versions instead of the "permanent" type allows one to break the seal to change plates when necessary. Just as with your car, a little preventative maintenance will go a long way.

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Both the carbon-fiber and aluminum series include two foam rubber leg grips, which Manfrotto advertises for “cold-weather use”. Personally, if I’m wearing gloves anyway, I do not feel a difference with the foam grip. They are not thick enough to offer any padding for your collarbone, so to me they are a waste of weight. While I can’t live without my Op-Tech leg pads for long walks with the scope over my shoulder, I don’t see much utility in the Manfrotto leg grips.

The metal allen wrench that used to be included with the tripod has been replaced by a plastic allen wrench that clips onto the tripod’s legs. Since I am regularly using this wrench for preventative maintenance (see sidebar), I appreciate the convenience of having it attached directly to the legs, but I question the durability of the plastic—both of the clip and the wrench itself.

Summary

For those who were waiting for a completely new innovation from Manfrotto, you may be somewhat disappointed with these new offerings. For those of us, however, who were just looking for a few tweaks here and there, then these new products do offer something. I like the lightweight, sleek new 700RC2 head (half the weight of the 3130), especially for packing to travel, but for everyday use, I will probably stick with my old-school 3130 for its fluid motion and ease of use. The new legs have seen only minor changes, but are worthwhile if you are looking for a new tripod. The 190 line offers the benefits of the full-sized 055 line, but in a smaller package—which any world traveler or long-distance hiker would be quite happy with.

Acknowledgments

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