

Up close & personal

One of the essentials for successful macro photography is a solid tripod, but some are more suitable than others. Kevin Carter takes a look at a selection of models to suit all budgets

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Your camera needs to be rock-steady for macro work, which means that you need a solid tripod. With lots of models on the market, what should you look for in a tripod suited for close-up and macro photography?

If you're using a macro lens, such as a 50mm or a 100mm, to focus within a few centimetres, a tripod with a tilting column will give you the greatest flexibility. But while this enables you to position your camera away from the centre of your tripod, there are other factors to consider.


I don't know of any tripods that don't have adjustable leg joints, but those with infinitely adjustable legs are easier to set in position.

Bear in mind that you're likely to want to carry the tripod, maybe even travel with it. I would advise 4-section legs over 3-section for compactness, but it does add to the price.

Tripods don't have to be heavy to be stable, they just have to be rigid and you can always add a counterbalance or ballast (such as your camera bag, which you will have with you anyway). Tripods made from new materials, such as Carbon Fibre, are both light and rigid, but they are much pricier than the aluminium models. Over the following pages, you will find a range of models intended to suit both the needs and budget of the macro photographer.

You need your macro and close-up tripod to be able to simply and easily get your camera and lens as low to the ground as possible.





“Tripods don’t have to be heavy to be stable, they just have to be rigid”



VR Lenses

Back in 2006, Nikon launched the first Micro lens of its kind with Vibration Reduction (VR) technology. The concept being that you can handhold the lens at slower shutter speeds and still achieve in-focus images. This would tend to suggest that you could use the lens without the need for a tripod. And for certain subjects, in good light, this may be an option. But there really is no substitute for locking your lens and DSLR to a solid tripod and avoiding the worry of shooting an image with shake in it.

Benbo Trekker Mk 3 with ball head £120

All four tubes are locked off with the one clamp and, while quick to set-up after some practice, I found you must always support the centre-column to avoid potential pitfalls. Once mastered, though, the Benbo soon pays dividends in the field.

The long centre column and infinitely adjustable legs make short work of the most demanding macro subjects. But while the Trekker 3 is one of the lighter models in the range, heavier cameras have to be used with

some care. I found this was especially true on smooth flooring, as the Trekker lacks additional leg bracing and is supplied with spiked feet. Clip-on, non-slip feet would have been very handy. Load capacity isn't stated, but it was perfectly fine with our Pentax K-m and 35mm macro lens. Our Trekker was supplied with the optional compact ball head. It's a pretty basic affair, but well matched for the tripod in size and can support the Pentax and similar DSLRs with a small macro lens.

Specification: (excl. ball-head)

Max Height (column down)	107cm
Max Height (column up)	150cm
Min Height	0cm
Leg Sections	2
Closed Length	84cm
Weight	2kg
Load capacity	n/a

Verdict:

Quality	■■■■
Features & Design	■■■■
Value for Money	■■■■
TOTAL	10/15

More information:

■ www.warehouseexpress.com



Giottos MTL 3361B £110 + MH1301 652 ball £79

Made of aluminium, it has a pivoting centre-column and 3-leg sections. Although one of the heaviest on test, it has a good range of features: foam wraps on all legs, a built-in spirit-level, reversible 1/4-in and 3/8-in head attachment, and an optional, non-adjustable short-column for very heavy cameras or large lenses. In order for the column to tilt, though, it has to be removed first and then re-inserted back into the hinged clamp. This isn't quite as slick as the Gitzo Explorer, and there are three

locks to adjust making it slightly more fiddly in use. I also found the size of locking knobs on the small side, as the centre-column needed a lot of tightening to secure. Our sample was sent with a (optional) Giottos MH1301 ball head. Boasting a separate friction control in addition to the usual locking knob, overall it's extremely well made. The legs don't make it quite so compact and it's one of the heaviest here, but it's sturdy and capable of supporting a decent load.

Specification: (inc ball-head)

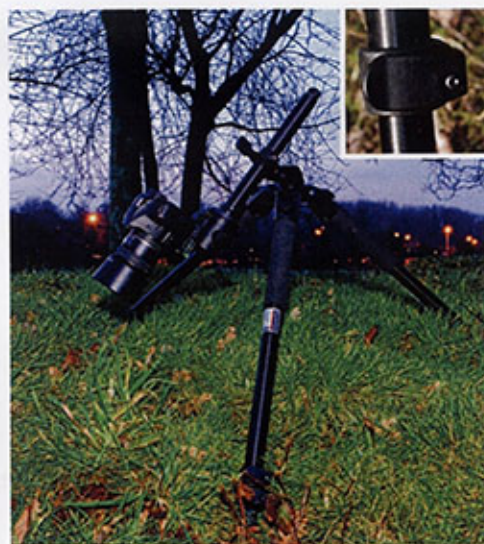
Max Height (column down)	144cm
Max Height (column up)	165cm
Min Height	25cm
Leg Sections	3
Closed Length	68cm
Weight	2.5kg
Load capacity	8kg

Verdict:

Quality	■■■■
Features & Design	■■■■
Value for Money	■■■■
TOTAL	10/15

More information:

■ www.daymen.co.uk



Gitzo Explorer GT2540 EX £490 + GH2750 off-centre ball £137

The GT2540 EX is the top-of-the-range model, with 4-section carbon-fibre legs and column and magnesium alloy castings for low weight. There are just two knobs, making it one of the easiest to adjust of those on test. Unlike other models from Gitzo, the Explorer dispenses with the usual three-position catch for adjusting the leg spread. Instead it has a large clamp providing variable adjustment for each leg. While this means the legs can be adjusted a full 90 degrees from vertical to horizontal,

permitting incredible flexibility for precise positioning, I found it difficult to set the legs evenly to level off. To prevent splaying, the leg clamps are quite stiff for one-handed operation, but the overall rigidity means that it can carry a load far greater than some of the tripods on test. The small size and low weight make it ideal for travelling, plus the huge range of adjustments available make it a real winner for macro work – but it all comes at a price.

Specification: (excl. ball-head)

Max Height (column down)	135cm
Max Height (column up)	164cm
Min Height	3cm
Leg Sections	4
Closed Length	57cm
Weight	1.8kg
Load capacity	12kg

Verdict:

Quality	■■■■■
Features & Design	■■■■■
Value for Money	■■■■
TOTAL	13/15

More information:

■ www.bogenimaging.co.uk



Manfrotto 190x ProB £90 + MN484RC2 head £39

The popular 190 comes in many guises and our sample, the 190x ProB, is one of the more high-end versions, with its aluminium tubing and 3-section legs to keep the price low.

As well as boasting a horizontal centre-column option and high-density foam leg wraps, other handy features include a bubble-level, weight-hook, and four leg-locking presets. This means the 190x ProB can be laid flat on the ground, like the Gitzo. I like the fact that the centre column uses just one

locking knob. It's also a breeze to switch from vertical to horizontal, but you must support the camera when making any adjustments.

Still, it's extremely rigid when locked off. If there's a niggle, it's that it can't tilt, but with the wide range of adjustment available from the leg-joints it remains easy to line up. We were sent the optional 484RC2 head for the 190. Although small, with a long stem it can support up to 4kg and, together with the 190x ProB, makes it very capable.

Specification: (excl. ball-head)

Max Height (column down)	122cm
Max Height (column up)	146cm
Min Height	8.5cm
Leg Sections	3
Closed Length	57cm
Weight	1.8kg
Load capacity	5kg

Verdict:

Quality	■■■■■
Features & Design	■■■■■
Value for Money	■■■■■
TOTAL	13/15

More information:

■ www.bogenimaging.co.uk



Slik Sprint PRO 11 3-Way £80

Slik subscribes to the notion that shorter legs should get you closer to your subject. That works if your subject is close to the ground, but you'll have to rely on another platform if your macro subject is higher. That's not because the Pro II isn't capable of extending to the height of the others on test, but it lacks a tilting column to get in close with the legs extended. Despite that, the Slik works reasonably well at low-level. With the centre-column removed, the leg joints allow

the tripod to lie almost flat to the ground. Unfortunately, the pan and tilt head has a limited range from the centre of the leg joints. And if the subject is small and at ground level, it simply can't get low enough. Still, it's a small price to pay for such portability and the Slik stands out for compactness and low weight. Aluminium construction ensures durability and it's more rigid than you'd expect. But loose fitting leg wraps and an average pan and tilt head seem at odds with the high build quality.

Specification: (inc ball-head)

Max Height (column down)	132cm
Max Height (column up)	162cm
Min Height	18cm
Leg Sections	4
Closed Length	68cm
Weight	1.1kg
Load capacity	2kg

Verdict:

Quality	■■■■■
Features & Design	■■■■■
Value for Money	■■■■■
TOTAL	9/15

More information:

■ www.intro2020.co.uk



Uni-loc Major System 1600 £175

The 1600 is the largest and heaviest on test, making it perfect for big DSLRs. Like the Benbo, on which it's modelled, the Uni-loc also exhibits an enormous range of movements, making it ideal for difficult to reach subjects. It has the edge on build quality and this particular model features an independently lockable centre-column. I found I was much less likely to have an accidental spill and it greatly improves on the original design. I also liked the folding column with the option of a

two head platform, allowing me to get low and orientate the head with ease. While the huge column clamp increases rigidity, you have to resist the temptation to over extend the column. You can shorten it quickly (it comes in two sections) with the provided hex-key, and it's easy enough to do in the field. You can also use one of the legs as a monopod. Bear in mind that you'll need to budget for a head, but apart from the weight and bulk, there are few other shortcomings.

Specification: (inc ball-head)

Max Height (column down)	136cm
Max Height (column up)	180cm
Min Height	0cm
Leg Sections	2
Closed Length	83cm
Weight	3.8kg
Load capacity	20kg

Verdict:

Quality	■■■■■
Features & Design	■■■■■
Value for Money	■■■■■
TOTAL	14/15

More information:

■ www.warehouseexpress.com



Velbon Ultra Luxi M complete with head £69

At first sight the diminutive Ultra Luxi M seems out of place in this company, but shorter leg tubes and 3-position leg joints means it can be used quite successfully for low-level work. And, thanks to the 5-section legs, the Velbon is capable of extending to the height of the others on test, but it lacks a tilting column.

I'm not normally a fan of pan and tilt heads, but I have to admit I was really impressed by the bundled Velbon PHD-41Q head. Not only were the locking handles very smooth,

allowing high precision when locking the head off, but it was rock-steady too. My only concern was some slight play in the rubber-covered quick-release plate. I had to all but over-tighten it to prevent vibration. A sliding mechanism for the 3-position leg joints is a nice design and that, as well as a two-piece column, allows it to get low. But it's still difficult to get in level for small subjects with a 50mm or 100mm macro. Even so, if weight and size are critical, the Velbon is well worth a look.

Specification: (inc ball-head)

Max Height (column down)	119cm
Max Height (column up)	139cm
Min Height	19cm
Leg Sections	5
Closed Length	34.5cm
Weight	1.26kg
Load capacity	2.5kg

Verdict:

Quality	■■■■
Features & Design	■■■■
Value for Money	■■■■
TOTAL	12/15

More information:

■ www.intro2020.co.uk



10 top tips on... Using a tripod for macro

1. Make sure the centre of gravity is compensated by the leg placement – ideally over one leg, if possible.
2. Don't over-extend the centre column as you will increase the likelihood of vibration and may adversely affect the centre of gravity.
3. Make sure all of the knobs/clamps are tightened off to increase rigidity and reduce vibration (will also save on accidental crashes).
4. Use spikes outdoors (push into soft ground) and non-slip feet indoors to prevent splaying and to increase rigidity.
5. Use the self-timer or buy a remote release to reduce camera vibration.
6. Ideally, use mirror lock-up or Live View (contrast-detection mode) to further reduce camera vibration.
7. Don't scrimp on the head. Although macro tripods require quite a lot of adjustment during set-up, you will still find that you spend more time adjusting the head.
8. For precise adjustment and ease of use, large ball-heads are preferable to 3-way pan-and-tilt type heads.
9. To compensate for different loads, choose a ball head with friction-control. Learn how to use it properly to prevent accidental crashes.
10. To further reduce the effects of vibration, choose a head with removable Arca Swiss style metal plates. Buy the plate made for your camera/lens.

Accessories: Tripods aren't the only means of support for the macro photographer, especially if they are working close to, or at, ground-level.

▼ Gorillapod SLR Zoom £35

This little table-top tripod uses a series of ball-joints to make up each of its three-legs, enabling not only ground-level access, but also for the legs to be able to wrap around fence posts and tree trunks. The SLR Zoom easily supports small to mid-size DSLRs with a 50mm or 100mm macro lens, and weighs just 241g.

■ www.intro2020.co.uk



◀ Kirk Low Pod £120

This specialised piece of kit, essentially a stable mounting plate for a ball head, allows easy low-level work for the macro enthusiast.

Made from cast aluminium, it comes with a large carrying handle and four-rubber feet for stability on a number of different surfaces.

■ www.kirkphoto.com



▲ Wimberley Plamp (PP-100) £30

Using a similar concept of ball joints to the Joby Gorillapod, the Plamp is a semi-rigid arm that clamps to your tripod or nearest stable object, and is used to steady your camera. Measuring 48cm in length, you could always use a second to position a tiny reflector or hold back some stray grass.

■ www.tripodhead.com

► Wildlife Watching Supplies – Double Bean Bag £22

Featuring two bags sewn back-to-back to provide additional support and greater stability in the field, the Double Bean Bag is a pretty low-tech but hugely reliable solution to the problem of working at ground-level. The beanbag is supplied without liners and unfilled. You can use birdseed, rice, corn and the like to attract animals, or fill with polystyrene for low-weight.

■ www.wildlifewatchingsupplies.co.uk

