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Using an infra red trip light beam tips by Wildlife Photographer Kevin Keatley

The Kit

The basic principles of a light beam are that when the beam is broken, a signal is sent to the camera to fire the shutter. You have two small units, one is the sender and one is the receiver. The sensitivity can be adjusted for the subject using the 3 way switch on the front of the units. It's labelled mammals, birds and insects. If you are photographing badgers and have the unit set to mammals, it is only triggered when something large breaks the beam and is not triggered by a passing fly.

How you set the beam up depends on your subject. The simplest method would be to set the beam up across a regular animal track. As the subject goes through the beam (either way), a photo is taken, but the light beam can be used for a whole range of subjects in many different ways. Across tracks, by a regular perch, at a feeding station or at a nest site. Check to see if a licence is needed for your subject at or near the nest. Natural England or the RSPB would have information on this. I have a licence for barn owls and kingfishers and great care needs to be taken to prevent any disturbance. For taking photos at one spot along the beam, a second trip can be coupled up so a photo would only be taken when something breaks the beam at the point the beams cross. This is good if you are photographing insects or small birds.

The beam is powered by a 9v battery in each unit.

Cameras and Flashes

The simplest way to use the light beam is in daylight. Just connect the 10 Mtr cable supplied to the camera. A short connector is also needed for the specific camera attachment - see list of ones available.

For flash photography check your camera settings. I use both Canon and Nikon kits. For Nikon, I set the camera to (AV) aperture priority and have the flashes set to TTL. With Nikon, I am able to adjust the F stop. For Canon, I set the camera and flashes to manual. For both sets of kits, I do test shots to see what F stop I can use to get the best lighting. I may use between 3 and 6 flash guns - 3 linked to the camera and 3 triggered by a slave cell. For badgers, I set the flashes to 1/2 power. This gives me a faster recycle time. For the tawny owl flight-shots, I set the flashes to 1/16 power. As well as a fast recycle time, the short burst of flash freezes the action. I have used wireless flash, but have found that the flashes only work if the flash guns are in front of the camera and most of my work, they are to the side.

Layout

For photographs with the light beam across a track, I have found that some camouflage around the camera and tripod and over the light beam unit helps to blend it in. Both the light beam units (sender and receiver) have a tripod thread on the base and a small tripod can be used to position them at the height you want. I use 2 Ultra pod II and strap them to branches or the camera tripod.

For my tawny owl photos, I set up in two ways. One way is to have the owl fly towards the camera. The wild tawny owl has got used to coming in for food. I've set the camera up close to the ground and used a wide angle lens. I've tried different set ups for the flashes, but usually set up in a curve by the camera and may be one flash set behind the owl for some backlight (moonlight). Doing trials by swinging my camera bag through the beam, I have found there is about 20cm travel from the beam breaking to the shutter firing. This test gives me the position to set the focus. For a side-on tawny owl photo where the owl flies across the camera, the focusing is easier. I also set the camera to motor drive (H) and if I'm lucky, get 2 or 3 shots as the owl flies through. Having the flashes set to 1/16 gives a quick recycle time and freezes the action.

I use some scrim around the flash guns, a C80 cover over the camera, C39 tripod mount cover and C38 tripod leg sleeves. Doing this makes it more natural and more likely your subject will come to where you want. The C80 camera and lens cover also protects your camera from the evening dew. The kit can get quite damp when left out for a few hours at night if not covered.

Tips

Check your camera settings. When I upgraded my camera, I found that the camera didn't fire when the tawny owl came through, but did when I set up. I realised that I had 30 minute auto power off set. It just took a couple of seconds to go into the menu and turn

this off. I also found that I had to do the same for the flash guns to take them off stand by. I use rechargeable batteries for the flash guns, because I found that I was getting through too many Duracells. By using rechargeables, they can be fully charged each time.

I keep my kit for infra red photography in a green grip bag. I have draw cord bags for the various cables. The flash guns, I keep in neoprene bags. They give some protection from knocks and the bags are large enough to keep the flash blocks attached.

There may be more ways to set up and use a light beam, but the methods I use, I have worked out over the years by trial and error, also talking to friends and sharing ideas, builds your knowledge. I've never been one for keeping the way I take photos a secret.

For me wildlife and wildlife photography is a passion - I love the outdoors. When waiting for a badger to come by in a winter woods, I can just lie there looking up at the stars through the leafless trees and listen to the sounds of the forest. When I'm photographing a kingfisher from a hide, it's a great feeling to know that they are just a few feet away, totally relaxed and unaware of my presence. Natural photographs capturing natural behaviour.

Like all wildlife photography, there is time spent planning and setting up, but when you get a result and it all comes together, it's just that bit more rewarding.

The Kit I Use

The tawny owl photos were taken using a Canon camera and a 24-105 lens. 3 Canon flashes linked by cable and 3 Nikon flashes fired by a slave cell. The camera and flashes set to manual, an aperture of F16 and speed of 250 second and flashes set to 1/16 power. You can use less flashes, but would need to use a small F stop (larger aperture). The camera speed is not so critical as it's the shorter burst of flash that freezes the action.

I've been so pleased with the infra red trip-light beam, that I've added it to our product list.

Below are the links to the products I use and we supply.

C90 Infra red trip inc. 10 Mtr cable and straps.
C90.6/C90.7/C90.3 Camera adapter cable (needed to connect your camera to the unit)
C22 Ultra Pod II
A2 Leafcut Scrim
C39-A Tripod Mount Cover
C38-G Tripod Leg Sleeves
C80 Camera and Lens and Cover
C28.2 Neoprene Bags for Flashes
C9 Grip/Rucksack