

Ryan Brenizer's Amazon Blog

[« Go to Ryan Brenizer's full Amazon Blog](#)

Review: Nikon 135mm f/2 DC

3:06 PM PST, January 2, 2009



[The Nikon 135 f/2.0 DC](#)

135mm sometimes seems like the forgotten focal length. Dead-smack in the middle of the 70-200 range, most professional shooters have replaced this lens with more versatile and f/2.8 zooms. But a prime lens still has some advantages -- it's twice as light-sensitive wide-open, and much smaller and lighter to boot. Below, here is the 135mm flanked by the 24-70mm f/2.8 and 70-200mm f/2.8 zooms:



Not only is it lighter than even the normal-range 24-70, it has a built-in lens hood, so you don't have to deal with bulky reversible hoods. But this is a double-edged sword -- the smaller built-in hood is much less effective at reducing flare and protecting the lens element.

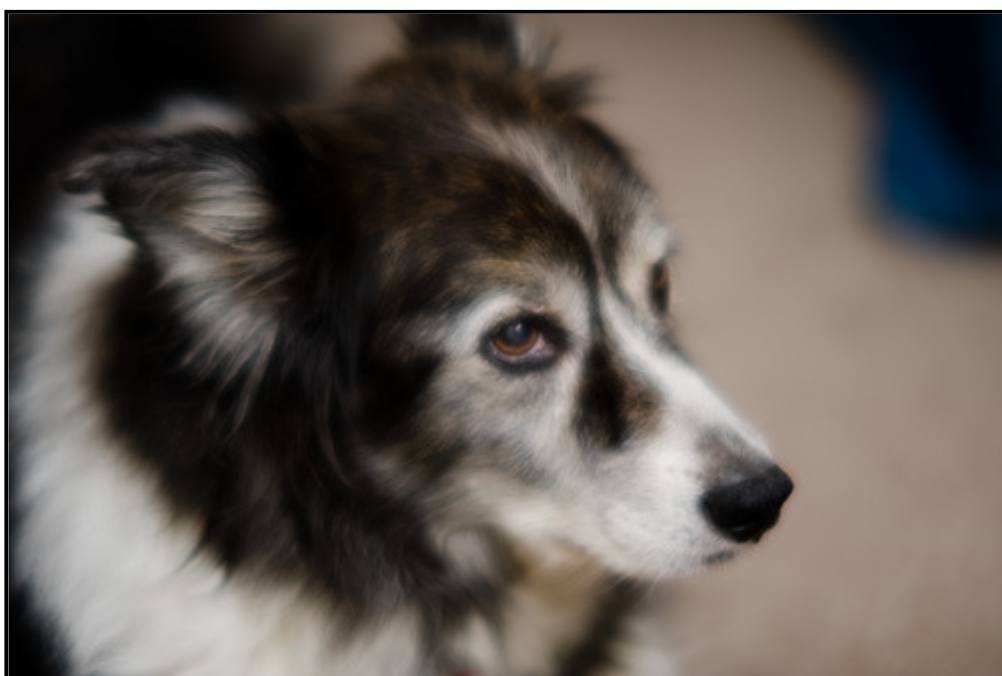
So is this lens any good? Yes, it's great ... in some ways. In some others, this lens, which has been essentially unchanged for 18 years, is sorely in need of an update.

BUILD QUALITY: It's solid metal, with the great crinkly focus rings of other pro Nikon lenses from the 90s. It has the vaguely annoying AF-MF switch because it's a screw-driven lens, but everything operates well. It has an aperture ring, so it will work on pretty much any Nikon SLR ever made for the past 50 years, but it's not going to autofocus on the D40 or D60. It's light enough to be well-balanced with all but the smallest cameras, but not too light for the D3.

DEFOCUS CONTROL: The 135mm, like Nikon's 105mm f/2, has a special trick called "Defocus Control." What this essentially does is use multiple focal planes to give your subjects a hazy glow without being exactly out-of-focus. Here's an example at it's most extreme. First, without the effect applied, and then one at the maximum setting:



Nice, contrasty and sharp



I am zee sexy, no?

Let me get this out of the way: **I hate this effect.** It's an artifact of 80s and 90s portraiture that hasn't aged any better than parachute pants or Vanilla Ice, basically a high-tech way to smear Vaseline on your lens. It had some use when everyone was shooting film and it was a good way to soften the wrinkles on

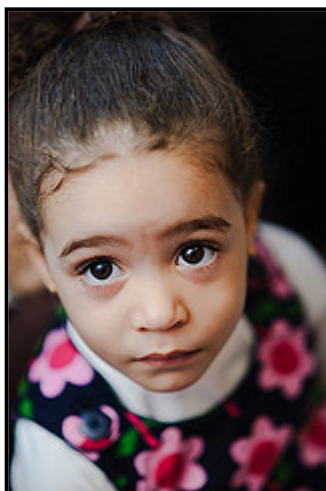
older subjects. But computer retouching can do a much better job these days without, say, hazing someone's flesh tone over their eyeball. So I find the very thing that makes this lens unique more of an annoyance than a feature. The good news is that when you switch this feature off, it makes a pretty darned good fast telephoto.

OPTICS: It's fairly sharp (not as sharp as my sharpest lenses, but sharp enough to count the eyelashes on your subjects even wide-open) and has smooth bokeh. I had hired a model to show off the bokeh, but she stood me up, so you're left with this ugly mug:



As you can see, this is a good focal length to take fairly tight portraits without distorting someone's features. The disfigured bokeh on the edges is normal for fast lenses. You can choose whether or not to care that you can see greenish chromatic aberration in the highlights even at this tiny size.

It was meant to be a portrait lens, and it works well as one. It will focus more closely than either the 70-200 or the 85mm f/1.4, making it easier to get close-up shots or tight portraits of children, like so:



Its color transmission is consistently great, right up there with the best Nikkors:



AUTOFOCUS: It's a screw-driven lens, so it depends on your camera's focus motor. On the D40 or D60 there's none at all, on a big-motored camera like the D3 it's pretty zippy, faster than the 85mm f/1.4 since it has a smaller front element to move around. I shot a few high-school basketball games with it as a favor for some relatives and it kept up OK -- the initial focus acquisition is very fast, but it's a bit sluggish at tracking a subject. Perhaps not coincidentally, this means it works very well in focusing for portraits, which this lens was made for, but is middling for sports:



Burned!

CONCLUSION: If you really love the speed and depth-of-field of f/2, or hate the lack of close-focus and weight of the 70-200mm f/2.8, this may be a good lens for you. It's a great lens for portraits, and 135mm paired with a 24-70mm covers a lot of situations on full frame. On DX cameras, it functions like a 200mm, which may make it less useful since that's more of a sports focal length, but in the end that's up to you. It would be nice if Nikon could update this into something similar to [Canon's 135mm f/2](#), which casts aside all the Defocus Control stuff to just be a fast, tack-sharp lens. Even better would be going to 135mm f/1.8 to compete with [the Zeiss lens for Sony's mount](#), but don't hold your breath for either of these. Nikon hasn't been too keen on updating general-use primes, and really needs to fill their fast-wide gap first. In the meantime, this current lens is a solid performer, great at some things and merely good at others.