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Autofocus Nikkor 300mm f/4 IF-ED

Known as the poor man's tele, the older Nikkor 300mm f/4 produces remarkably good photos.



If you don't need an extra stop of speed or fast autofocus, this lens should suffice for much of your telephoto needs. Replaced early in 2001 by the eagerly anticipated [300mm f/4D IF-ED AF-S](#).

*angle of view: 8 degrees 10 mins close focus: 8 ft (2.5m)
filter: 39mm drop-in*

The Basics

Since its introduction in 1988, the 300mm f/4 has been the low-cost alternative for a high-quality telephoto lens in Nikon's lineup.

This lens has a maximum f/4 aperture, with a minimum aperture of f/32. Minimum focus distance is a modest 8 feet (2.5). A built-in slide-out hood provides excellent shielding for the large 82mm front element. The lens cap is a soft, leather affair that some love, some hate. You can't remove it quite as quickly or without looking like you can the traditional cap, but it does protect the lens quite well. Filters are the special 39mm drop-in variety. You get two drop-in brackets with the lens, and if you're not using filters, the one with the flat glass element in it should always be used (it's part of the optical formula).



Glacier National Park. left: F5 with 300mm f/4 and TC-14B converter, Fuji Provia. Right: F5 with 300mm, no converter, Fuji Provia.

The focus ring is wide and easily distinguished. An auto/manual focus switch is built into focus ring, and a user-adjustable focus limiter sits just in front, allowing you to set the range the lens will focus in.

A rotatable tripod mount is provided. The lens weighs in at nearly three pounds (47 ounces).

Handling

The aperture ring has one annoying surprise: when you set f/32, the aperture ring locks at this f/stop. You release the lock by pressing a small button on the right of the ring. Of course, on a camera that requires the minimum aperture be set (the F5, for example), who cares? But if you're using this lens on an F90x/N90s, it will annoy you.

Manual focusing is merely okay, and takes a half turn to go from minimum focus distance to infinity. When set to manual focusing, you don't get that silky MF Nikkor feel, but a noisy, semi-smooth touch. At least the ring stays exactly where you leave it in manual focus mode, and you can easily "tweak" the focus with certainty.

Quick Evaluation

Recommended

A decent telephoto lens; but not for action shooting, as the AF is too slow.

★★★★☆ features
★★★★☆ performance*
★★★★☆ build
★★★★☆ value

*Optically, this lens is near a five-star rating, but slow focus and the 8 foot minimum distance hold it back.

Lens no longer produced

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Other Info

Also consider:

- 1 [Nikkor 70-300mm f/4-5.6D ED](#). Lighter, cheaper, and more versatile. But at 300mm not only is a stop slower, it is significantly less sharp. If you shoot at 300mm often, this is not a wise alternative, but it is a serviceable substitute in a pinch.
- 1 The [300mm f/4D IF-ED AF-S](#). This new version addresses virtually all of the perceived drawbacks of the lens. The AF-S motor provides faster autofocus, plus it gives instant manual override. The AF-S focuses significantly closer (4.8' compared to 8'). Most interesting to many is the fact that it uses the E-type converters, which retain autofocus and full camera capabilities. Plus, it uses 77mm filters. The drawback? It costs more.
- 1 The [70-200mm VR](#) with a TC-14E. Surprisingly, this combination is as sharp as the 300mm

Performance

Okay, let's get the bad news out of the way: the 300mm f/4 is no speed demon on autofocus. My 70-300mm f/4-5.6D is faster, on every one of my bodies. On my N90s, I've seen it hunt for focus, though I've never seen it do that on the F5. I'd say the 300mm f/4 is barely adequate for sports or wildlife assignments, though with the beefy AF motor in the F5, it's a little better. Fortunately, if you're in a situation with some "knowns," you can use the focus limiter to improve autofocus time.

The optics can be summed up in a word: great. The lens produces images with contrast punch and edge-to-edge sharpness at all but the widest and smallest apertures. Wide open, the edges are a tad soft, though I doubt most would notice. At minimum aperture, I think I see a bit of softening, probably due to diffraction. It's as if you're using a 300mm f/2.8 that's had one f/stop removed (not surprising, since the original f/2.8 and the f/4 both have 8/6 element designs).

With the TC-14B converter, the 300mm f/4 produces credible, publishable images, though there is distinct softening at all apertures, especially at the edges. I'd prefer the MF 400mm f/5.6 or even the [80-400mm VR](#) over the 300mm/TC-14B combo, but carrying multiple telephotos around isn't something I often have the luxury of doing.

Drawbacks

- 1 **Weight.** Consider that my 70-300mm f/4-5.6D ED weighs just over one pound and the 300mm f/4 is almost three pounds. The 300mm f/4 produces far better images at 300mm, but that's a lot of weight to be carrying around, so consider the application you'll use it for.
- 1 **Filters.** For a short time in the early 1990's it appeared that Nikon was going to standardize on 39mm drop-ins for their telephoto lineup. Today, it appears that 52mm is the standard (and the AF-S version of this lens uses 77mm filters). Either way, filters are expensive and generally only found at the bigger shops. A circular polarizer, for example, will probably set you back more than US\$200.

Positives

- 1 **Optics.** Excellent optics that pretty much match the much more expensive f/2.8 300mm AF-I.
- 1 **Value.** With all the alternatives, clean used versions of this lens can be picked up at very reasonable prices. If you don't need faster or closer focus, this lens is capable of everything the more expensive new version can do.

(both the version in this review and the AF-S version). My 300's are actually languishing in lens lockup at the moment, as the 70-200mm is the large lens of choice on most of my shoots.

- 1 Third-party lenses. Tamron's 200-400mm f/5.6 is often mentioned as a competitor, though it's not nearly as sharp and a stop slower. Sigma and Tokina both make several lenses that compete directly, though my clear favorite of the bunch is the Sigma 300mm f/4 APO, which focuses down to 4' (1:3).

RB writes: *You mention that the aperture ring locks at the f/32 position and the lock is released by pressing a small button on the ring. That is true, but what you don't mention is that this button can be locked in the "aperture ring free" position by holding it down and rotating it anti-clockwise through 90 degrees (there's a tiny white dot on the button which shows which position it's in).*