

TRIPOD HEADS FOR WILDLIFE FILMING

Over the past 15 years or so I've used a lot of the quality tripod heads on the market. I've also bought and sold many of them in my quest to find the perfect one, and the search still continues.

These are my thoughts, for what they're worth, on these heads. It should be noted that many of the comments will only apply to the very specific demands of long lens wildlife shooting, and for most users any of these models would be more than acceptable. It's only when you put a 600mm lens on the camera and try to follow the erratic movements of wild subjects that the problems show themselves.

Sachtler Video 18 mk2

Weight 3kg

Bowl 100mm



In Alaska with the Video 18 mkii



My first serious head after using the Manfrotto 116 at the start. I used the Video 18 for about 5 years. Nice smooth movement in pan and tilt, smooth starts and stops with little backlash. Counterbalance works fairly well, but with only a 4 position counterbalance you have to be lucky to get it just right. Just a little on the light side to hold long lenses on big cameras really steady and there is an inevitable slight bounce to it

Sachtler Video 20 mk2

Weight 3.5kg

Bowl 100mm



Phantom HD on the Video 20 mkii



Same comments as for the Video 18 mk2

Sachtler Video 25 Plus

Weight 4.5kg

Bowl 150mm



In Taiwan with the Video 25 Plus



My first foray into 150mm bowl tripods, almost entirely as a response to wanting to get rid of the bounciness of the 100mm heads with long lenses. This also meant that I had to get rid of my solid Gitzo tripod legs as they'd only take a 100mm bowl head at most, so the Video 25 Plus went onto Sachtler HD carbon legs.

I ordered a brand new Video 25 Plus and when it arrived it had such terrible backlash that I sent it back to Optex and had a demo model while they sent it back to Sachtler. The demo one was a lot better and I ended up keeping that instead. It seems very likely that they improve once they've worn in a bit, but there's still definite backlash, and diagonal movements are not that even making it difficult to follow flying birds for instance - as usual these comments only really relate to ultra long lens work. Counterbalance works very well, largely due to having a lot of steps - 9 plus 1/2 step switch for 18 total. A Super 16 or HD camera with Canon 150-600mm lens tended to need position 2ish.

First head that I used that has a tilt lock pin, a nice feature, rather than having to lock it with the lever

Ronford Baker 2004

Weight 6.5kg

Bowl 150mm



Orkney Islands with Ronford 2004

Swapped the Video 25 Plus for a Ronford Baker 2004 and enjoyed its smooth movements for several years. It still has the smoothest, most frictionless movement of any head I've

used. Also something interesting is the way the fluid seems to engage compared to the Sachtlers; on the Sachtler when you start a pan there is a fair bit of resistance which you push against, overcome and the move starts and the friction eases. With the Ronford it's the opposite - there is virtually no resistance at the start and it builds as you pan. This gives you totally smooth starts and great control as you pan. The downside of this though is that because there is so little resistance it's very hard to hold it steady as any slight hand pressure will make it move a little, and it makes it very hard for the counterbalance to work properly as with so little resistance it always wants to drift up or down unless the counterbalance is 100% spot on (which it never can be). The counterbalance works fairly well, but limited to 8 steps it's pot luck as to how well the weight of your equipment will balance

Ronford Baker 2003

Weight 3.5kg

Bowl 100mm



On Snowdon with the Ronford 2003 - because it's light!

Bought one of these to go with the 2004 for when I needed more portability. Basically it's very similar in operation, plusses and minuses, to the 2004, just lighter and so prone to that bounciness again. Overall I'd give it slightly better movement than the comparable Sachtler Video 20 mk2, but slightly less efficient counterbalance

Sachtler Horizon II
Sachtler Video 25 mk2

Weight 6kg
Weight 6kg

Bowl 150mm
Bowl 150mm



These are exactly the same head with a different badge. Don't ask me why but I ended up with both of these at the same time, and also still had the Ronford Baker 2004 - my tripod head acquisition syndrome had probably peaked just here!

Same comments as the Video 18 mk2 except less bounciness due to the bigger bowl, plus they have an extra counterbalance lever giving 8 positions rather than just 4. The pan and tilt are fine, but I'd just come from the Ronford Baker 2004 when I got these so the movement felt very non-fluid and I didn't like them much. They are decent workhorse heads though

Ronford Baker Atlas 30

Weight 9kg

Bowl 150mm



In a hide with the Atlas 30

First foray into the really big heads - wow, it's heavy! That 9kg is without the quick release plate too so in operation it was more like 10kg.

Beautifully built like all Ronfords, although they have started to use stickers on some parts rather than the fantastic engraving and painting on the 2003 and 2004.

Movement was very smooth but much more positive than on the 2004, giving better control, but still almost as good fluidity of movement for following flying birds.

Counterbalance is now 1-100 stepless which is excellent, but it seems to really struggle

when tilting up or down more than say 45 degrees, it then makes the movement very stiff and unpleasant - that was my experience anyway. It was for this reason alone that I decided to sell it, otherwise it was a fantastic bit of kit

Sachtler Studio 2 (aka Video 30)

Weight 9kg

Bowl 150mm



On estuary with Phantom HD on Studio II

The next big head, about the same weight as the Ronford Atlas 30 but seemed less due to more compact size. Nice smooth movement, decent counterbalance (though still in steps so not ideal), also nice firm control on the pans and tilts. BUT, it had the most awful backlash I've ever seen. I took it into the service centre and they looked at and said it was "within spec". I was astounded, but again maybe for most uses it was and would be fine, but for long lens work it was a joke. To end a pan you needed to go past where you wanted to stop and let it drift back! You could even see it happen just by looking at the head rather than down the viewfinder.

The other problem that it had is that the minimum weight it would counterbalance (ie position 1 on the levers) was too much for a Varicam and Canon HJ40, so as you tilted up or down, it would resist you and slowly spring back up when you released your hand.

O'Connor 2060HD

Weight 7.5kg

Bowl 150mm



Phantom HD on the O'Connor 2060HD

At last I discovered the O'Connors! Tried a 2575 and immediately ordered a 2060HD as it seemed similar but at much lower weight. Only after using the Atlas and Studio 2 would the O'Connor 2060HD seem like a reasonable-weight head!

Everything on the O'Connors is stepless - counterbalance, pan and tilt, yeah! Even the Ronford Atlas had steps for the pan and tilt. As others have said, once you've had this it's hard to go back.

Movement is nice and smooth, much better than the Sachtlers but still not as good as the Ronford 2004 for diagonal moves and hence flying birds. It has the best stops though, absolutely no backlash whatsoever. Counterbalance works better than on any other head I've used and being stepless means you can get it just right.

The only drawback is when starting pans - tilts are OK. On pans on the end of a long lens it's very difficult to get a totally smooth start. It's not awful but there tends to be a little jerk as you start, especially if you try a tiny little single move just to inch along with the subject. Very annoying as it would probably be near perfect otherwise, and still ranks as my number 1 choice head for wildlife by a fair margin.

Note that if you order a standard 2060HD the fluid drag levels are really low, and you have to order it with heightened drag for it to be in any way useable with long lenses.

Also has a tilt lock pin like the Sachtler Video 25 Plus

O'Connor 1030

Weight 4kg

Bowl 100mm or 150mm



Slow motion waterfalls with Phantom HD on the O'Connor 1030

Bought one to go alongside the 2060 for when portability was required. Everything about the 2060 applies regarding movement. Counterbalance doesn't seem quite as good though, it changes a lot as you tilt up and down, so you can balance it perfectly and have it hold steady when looking up say 45 degrees, if you then tilt down for a while and then put it back up to the same 45 degree position it won't hold any more. This is something to do with the spring tensions changing as you move I'm sure, and it the same with all the other heads listed here, but the Atlas 30 and O'Connor 2060 seem less prone to it, probably due to the beefier construction and larger springs?

Same bouncy problem as all the 100mm bowl heads though, even though I use a 150mm bowl on it, it's still a "small" head

Miller DS60

Weight 6.5kg

Bowl 150mm



Only tried a demo version, so no long term experience. Mixed feelings about this head. Size and weight are good, pretty well made, though not as good as old style Sachtlers and certainly not in the same league as O'Connors or Ronfords. Movement was OK, but lacked a little fluidity I felt, though starts and stops were pretty good. Counterbalance worked fairly well, but I found it had quite a bouncy feel to it when you stopped tilting up or down, like it wasn't a really nice, definite dead stop. For the price I think it could be quite a good choice if it suits your style - Millers seem to be finding quite a few fans the last few years, particularly things like the Arrow 55. Also has a tilt lock pin like the Sachtler Video 25 Plus

Cartoni Master

Weight 10kg

Bowl 150mm



On location in my living room with the PDW700 and HJ40 on the Cartoni Master

Cartoni Monster would be more apt! It's a big head, same sort of built quality as the Miller I reckon, so OK but not the best. Movement is very smooth, decent starts and stops, except has the same sort of tilt bounciness as the Miller, except much much worse. Didn't take me long to rule this one out

And the final scores are...

Head - Marks out of 10	Fluidity	Counter- balance	Backlash	Stability	Total
Sachtler Video 18 mk2 / 20mk2	5	6	6	4	21
Sachtler Video 25 mk2	5	6	6	8	25
Sachtler Video 25 Plus	4	8	3	8	23
Ronford Baker 2003	9	6	7	5	27
Ronford Baker 2004	10	5	9	6	30
Ronford Baker Atlas 30	8	6	10	10	34
Sachtler Studio 2	8	7	2	9	26
O'Connor 1030	8	6	9	5	28
O'Connor 2060HD	7	10	10	10	37
Miller DS60	5	7	7	8	27
Cartoni Master	8	5	7	8	28