

# *Novoflex ClassicBall 5 II*

## *A Field-based Review*



Robert Thompson



# NOVOFLEX CLASSICBALL 5 II



## INTRODUCTION

Every photographer at some point no matter what their photographic speciality is, uses a tripod in their photography. In order for the tripod to function correctly it requires a head. While it's important to invest in a robust tripod to provide proper stability, it's the head that allows you to position your camera in any direction you choose. All too often photographers place less emphasis on the tripod head and are happy to stick with what comes with the tripod. It's a common mistake many photographers make and it only becomes apparent when a much heavier lens setup is placed on the head and tripod which is totally inadequate for the job. Poor head or tripod performance can seriously compromise your results which can be frustrating especially when the opportunity is not easily repeatable.

Selecting a head that matches the type of photography you do is an essential part of the photographic process; it will improve your

experience and help you get the best from your photography. It's a lesson we all learn through our mistakes at some point. I have, throughout my photographic career, used a tripod in all of my work except when circumstances prevent me from doing so and then I will normally have additional support in some form.

Investing in a tripod and head should be deemed as important as choosing a camera. It should also be considered as a long-term investment, and if researched properly, will give you many years of service. It is therefore important to treat your tripod and ball head separately making sure your choice will adequately suit the type of photography you do. If it's wildlife and long lens photography then you should select accordingly and ensure that the product will comfortably handle the bulk and additional weight without destabilising your camera setup.



Ball heads are traditionally the most popular choice for nature photography for a number of reasons. They are more compact, highly-versatile and quick to operate and adjust, which are important factors when you need to react quickly to changing situations. Many tripods these days come with a ball head as standard however, most tend to be rather basic and of average design. There is little point in investing your money in an expensive tripod if the ball head on top is likely to underperform. There are many different models and brands available to choose from so making a large financial investment in one needs careful consideration.

I have, like many photographers, accumulated several ball heads from different manufacturers over the years. While they satisfied most of my main requirements, there were always shortcomings with all of them. Over a period of time, they all developed issues such as loss of friction, stiffness and creep or sag, which in macro photography is an annoying problem, especially at higher magnifications; this was one issue that I continually found frustrating. I often found myself overtightening the knob/lever to prevent this.

I should make it clear from the start that this is not a technical-based review compiled from a desk in my office, but one that is based on using the Classic Ball 5 II over the past few months in a range of different situations. If it's a desktop review with facts and figures you require there are plenty on the web to choose from. I tend to value field-based reviews rather than those which are purely technical where little usage of the equipment has been made making it difficult to give a fair assessment of how it performs; this is my own opinion, others may have a different view.

So what are the ideal characteristics we should be looking for in a ball head? It can be a difficult question to answer as some photographers will have their own ideas based on their photographic needs. However, there are some requirements that are important and relevant no matter where your photographic interests lie.

#### [Ideal characteristics of a ball head based on my own experience.](#)

1. Compactness and build quality; these are key considerations for those photographers, myself included, who need to carry a tripod around for most of the day.

2. The diameter of the ball is an important consideration. Hanging a DSLR or mirrorless camera and a long focal length lens on a ball head that is too small, or is incapable of supporting such a set-up is likely to compromise not only image quality, but you also risk the setup becoming unstable and the whole assembly in the worst case, ending up on the ground.

3. It is also important to have precise controls, which are easy to activate (even with gloves on), that lock and secure the ball firmly with no movement. In macro photography this is a crucial consideration as there must be no creep or sag. I have to say that this has always been a shortcoming I have experienced with many different ball heads, even those, which are expensive!

4. It should also have independent friction control for regulating the locking mechanism and pre-setting the ball when unlocked.

5. Integrated bubble spirit level to ensure your horizons are level; this is especially important when framing subjects that have little latitude for cropping.

6. Quick Release (Q-R) camera plate system. The Arca Swiss dovetail platform is adopted by many manufacturers and the most frequently used by professionals. However, some companies also have their own design.

7. Maximum load capacity. There is no continuity between manufacturers in terms of a standardised measurement. However, it would be more meaningful if it is applied to the maximum load the head can take particularly when positioned off the vertical axis; this is an important factor and especially relevant in macro photography. To be honest, many manufacturers claim all sorts of high load capacities, but how accurate the figures are is difficult to know.

These are some of the main points to consider however, there are others depending on what your requirements are.



## NOVOFLEX CLASSICBALL 5 II

Novoflex has a long history and reputation for producing high-quality equipment for the photographic industry. Their reputation extends well beyond Europe, with many photographers from around the world familiar with their products. Their innovative approach to design is based on practical experience and most importantly, having complete control over the production process right through to completion. My own experience with Novoflex products is one of precision, quality and reliability with attention to detail; these are the points that tick the box for me.

One of the company's major attributes is the ability to develop specialised equipment and important accessories that the vast majority of leading camera manufacturers just seem to avoid or don't want to do. The photographic industry relies companies like Novoflex since they provide the means to achieve many types of specialised imagery that would be much more challenging to accomplish using conventional equipment; this is more important than ever today in the digital world we operate in. A look at the product range on their website will bear testament to the wide range of photographic accessories that have been developed by the company to overcome many of the challenges photographers face today. Their attention to detail is synonymous with their motto which is, "Precision for Professionals".

The Novoflex ClassicBall 5 II is the top of the range in their ClasicBall series. The other two in the group consisting of a ClassicBall 3 II; a medium-weight head and the ClassicBall 2, which is a compact version, but never-the-less, constructed to professional standards.



On opening the box, my first impression was one of quality and precision, but I expected no less from a company with a renowned track record. The colour coordination of titanium grey and blue is keeping in line with the companies standard branding, which is synonymous throughout their product range. A visual examination of the head is usually where most people start and every component has the hallmark of being well constructed and cleverly thought out. No part on it was lacking, or cheap in any way. The construction of the ball head is solid with all of the components (except for the blue friction ring) fabricated from machined aluminium. The overall finish is to a very high standard. Novoflex gives a two-year warranty based on regular everyday use. It would be unfair to compare it directly to some of my other ball heads for a number of reasons in that their design and construction is somewhat different. Novoflex has pushed the boundaries with this head and introduced some features which differ from the typical conventional approach of other manufacturers.

One of the major advantages of the revised version of this ball head is the ability to combine two important features into one head. The CB5II is primarily a standard functioning ball head, but it now comes with an integrated levelling base for panoramic photography; this eliminates



(above) *The ClassicBall 5II in the normal position and reversed for panoramic image capture.*

(left) *The three sizes of ClassicBall heads in the series. Each capable of delivering excellent results in their class.*



the need for two. Having a dual-purpose ball head can be a real advantage if you are switching between shooting close-ups and panoramic landscapes. As a natural history photographer, I frequently find myself shooting a wide range of subjects in a single day. Weight is an important factor and this head gives me the flexibility of shooting close-ups while at the same time allowing me to capture panoramic landscapes, which is one of my special interests. Combined the CB5II with the VR III System and one of the panoramic base units, provides the ideal setup for precision panorama photography.

(below) is a diagram of the basic ClassicBall 5 II components. Also included is the Q=Mount. There are other variations of mounts which you can use. All integrate completely with the camera base platform. When placing different lens/camera combinations you can select the appropriate friction preset for that configuration, which can be set in advance the next time that particular combination is being used.

## CLASSICBALL 5 II COMPONENTS





**CLASSICBALL 5 II TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS**

Height	117.5 mm (4.6")
Base diameter	78 mm (3.07")
Camera-mount diameter	59 mm (2.3")
Ball diameter	55 mm (2.1")
Weight	970g (2.1 lbs)
Maximum support	12kg (26 lbs)
Tripod connection	1/4" & 3/8" thread
Camera connection	1/4" & 3/8" thread

**DESIGN OVERVIEW**

**Ball Diameter**

What makes this ball head so unique are the many features Novoflex have incorporated into its design. The large, 55mm diameter of the ball allows for a very smooth and consistent rotation during movement with precision locking ability. Even with larger focal length lenses attached, there is no sign of creep or sag when angulated off the vertical axis despite the increased weight. The balance between the weight of the camera assembly and the drag when the appropriate friction pre-set is selected, still produces a very smooth rotation making it easy to position my heaviest setup. The lubricant-free design stops the ball and enclosure from attracting dust, dirt, and debris from entering the cradle.

**Advanced Friction Adjustment**

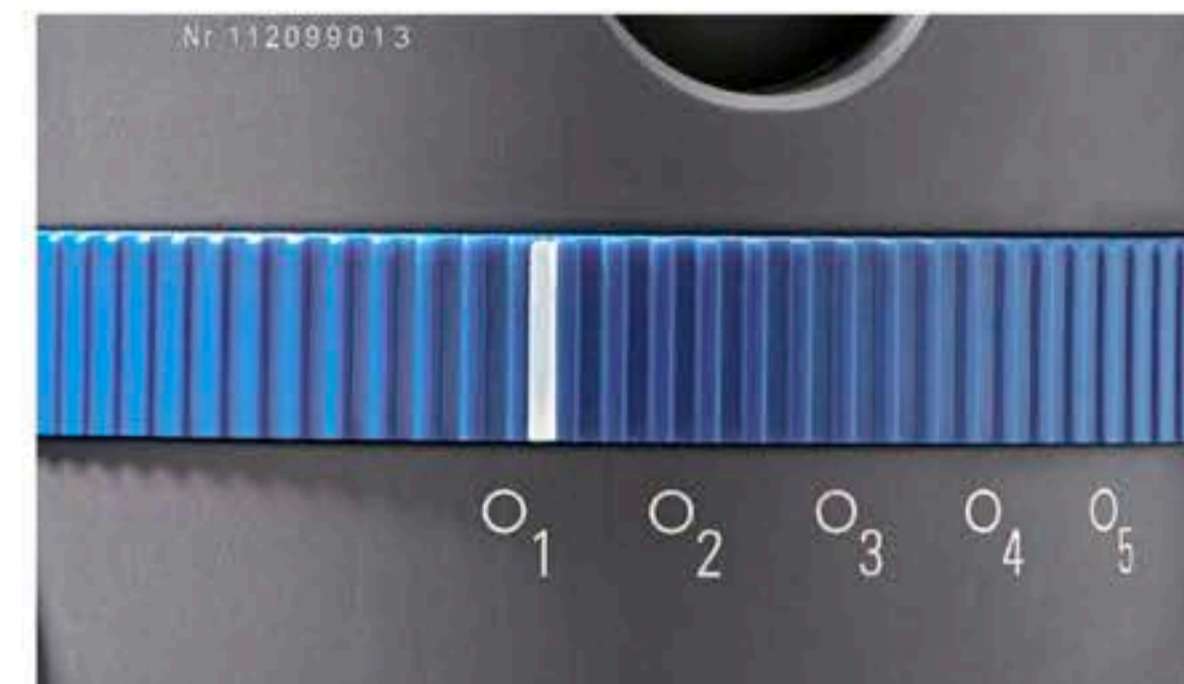
Another nice and innovative touch is the "Advanced Friction Control". Unlike many other expensive heads which use an additional knob, or screw to change the friction pressure. Novoflex has gone one better by designing a heavy-duty blue knurled plastic ring, which has a series of five built-in pre-set friction levels; five being the level with the greatest resistance. The advantage of this approach is that you can apply the same friction level each time to your different camera/lens combinations. I find this feature extremely useful when working with different camera/lens combinations as I can quickly select the appropriate pre-set level in advance. This is one of the shortcomings of

most other ball heads is not having the ability to replicate the precise friction setting each time.

Despite being the only plastic external element, the ring itself is well constructed and rotates between each numbered stop smoothly and precisely with a click-stop between each of the friction settings. Another advantage with this design is you can easily find and adjust the friction without having to take your eye from the viewfinder. Novoflex has a built-in safety precaution in that you can only adjust the friction control setting when the locking lever is engaged this is to prevent the ball with your expensive camera assembly from dropping accidentally.



(above) The large 55mm diameter ball head. The lubricant-free design prevents the ball and its enclosure from collecting dirt.



(above) The advance friction control is set by adjusting the heavy-duty knurled ring. Five presets are available which can meet the needs of any camera/lens configuration.



### Locking Lever

Unlike many other ball heads, which generally use a rotating knob to lock and unlock the ball, Novoflex has chosen to use a lever that is large enough to activate with gloves but not excessively prominent to become a problem. Also, the design and size of the lever is enough to grasp to lock and unlock the ball without excessive force. If the friction control is set to its minimum setting (°1) the lever functions a bit like an on/off switch. You need to be mindful here with heavy setups if the pre-set is one of the lower settings. Another advantage is when your eye is to the viewfinder you can quickly tell if the lever is locked or unlocked simply by feeling the lever with your fingers.

### Portrait Slots

One of the most annoying aspects of conventional ball head design is that most manufacturers provide only one 90° portrait slot; this effectively means having to constantly rotate the panning base to be able to change either the shooting orientation (from horizontal to portrait), or the ability to move the camera assembly up or down. The beauty of the CB5II is the three portrait slots which effectively allows you to utilise these movements without the need to rotate the panning base. The two opposing slots allow 180° of movement (while the other slot allows you to place the camera in portrait or vertical orientation). I have to say that I find this approach extremely useful in the field when I don't have an L-bracket attached. One point worth bearing in mind, if the locking lever is on your left side facing you and you want to utilise the portrait slot it is on the right side, which some photographers might find a little awkward as the shutter button and grip if you are using one are now at the bottom as opposed to the top. However, rotating the panning base around and placing the locking lever on the right gets around the problem. It's not a major inconvenience operating the lever with your right hand. Most professional photographers tend these days to use an L bracket which makes the issue somewhat irrelevant.

*(top right) A close-up of the design of the lever, which is large enough to operate easily when wearing gloves. You can also adjust the leavers locking position by pulling it out and rotating it to a slightly different point.*

*(bottom right) A view of two of the portrait slots. Having the additional slots means you can change the shooting orientation without having to constantly rotate the panning base. Unlike other ball heads you have 180° of movement between the two opposing drop slots.*





### The Panning Base

Finally, the panning base uses a fairly conventional, knurled metal knob to lock or unlock. It has a smooth action and cannot be completely unscrewed. The base also has 360° engraved scaling at the bottom of the housing. When shooting panoramic images, it is a simple and quick procedure to invert the head. Remove the grub securing screw on the Q=Mount and transfer the clamp to the base of the ball head. The support plate is now the base and is secured on to the tripod base providing an accurate horizontal levelling platform to accommodate panoramic shooting. Unlocking the lever will allow you to line up the head accurately with the integrated bubble spirit level without having to make adjustments to your tripod legs.



(above) The CB5II can be quickly reversed from a conventional ball head into a panoramic head with a levelling base. It allows you to accurately capture a series of images when combined in the appropriate software produces a composite photo.

### The Q=Mount

Having used these before from Novoflex, the construction and finish are on par with the ball head. When attached, it is solid and integral with the head. When connected to the Arca Swiss compatible plate on the camera base or tripod collar of a lens the screw clamp is solid and precise with no movement at all. My only comment is the bubble spirit level is obscured when the camera is in place. It's not a major inconvenience, but it requires you to level the head before attaching the camera.



(above) The standard Q=base with the built-in spirit level.

(left) The inverted CB5II inverted for panoramic photography.





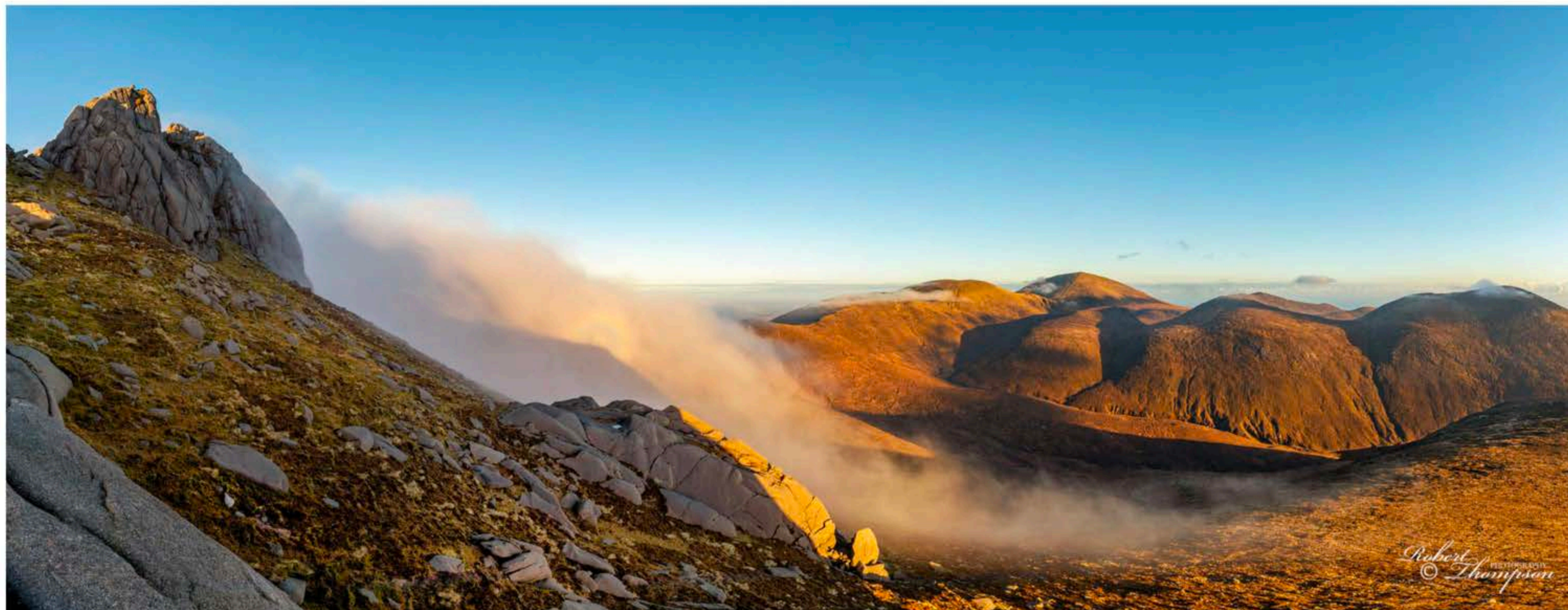
*One of the advantages for me is the ability of this ball head to handle heavy setups. In this case the using the Castel-Micro for fungi photography in the field. Selecting the appropriate friction control balances the weight more evenly making adjusting and positioning the assembly much easier.*

## IN THE FIELD

For me, the ultimate test for any piece of equipment is how it performs in the field. It takes a little time to acquaint yourself with the settings and the general use of the CB5II head since its components and their positions do not follow the conventional design of other ball heads. However, having said that I found after a short time it was straightforward to use. The rotation of the ball was extremely smooth

with no resistance throughout all of the friction settings; even when larger focal length lenses were placed on it, the ball moved effortlessly between positions, holding the camera and lens assembly exactly in the desired position. The lubricant-free design stops the ball and its enclosure from attracting unwanted dirt, and debris. I found this reassuring since my tripod is frequently close to, or on the ground, often





*Photographing in mountain regions means considering carefully about what you take with you as weight is an important factor. Having a dual purpose ball head means you have the ability to cover different subjects and situations without having to carry multiple heads. I was able to quickly invert the CB5II to shoot this 10 image panorama which I later stitched in Photoshop. A ball head has many advantages but having a dual function is the most beneficial of all.*

among vegetation where dirt small bits of debris could easily find their way into the cradle.

I have been using the CB5II for a while now throughout a range of different conditions and temperatures from the tops of snow-covered mountains to the seashore with no problems at all. It has supported comfortably every lens from a 14mm ultra wideangle to 500mm telephoto without any issues at all. I have also used it for all of my current panoramic images, quickly inverting the head to shoot the sequence and then reverting it back to a conventional ballhead. I find this feature extremely useful and quick to operate. Being able to work all of the heads functions with gloves on was another advantage when in the mountains and on very cold days. At heights of 3,000ft and in snow and freezing fog all of the components worked perfectly including the AFC pre-set ring.



*The CB5II can easily cope with a wide range of camera/lens setups. In this case it's balancing one of my 500mm lenses with ease.*



The key to getting the most from this head is the use of the friction settings which make the process of accommodating heavy setups easier to handle. Unlike other conventional heads, you can accurately apply the exact level of resistance every time to your different combinations; something you can't replicate on other ball heads. Another big plus which I found useful was the double slots which give me 180° versatility when changing the orientation of the camera assembly downwards or backwards without having to rotate the head. You could argue that the double slots would increase the risk of dirt/debris etc. getting lodged between the ball and cradle. However, in 3 months of using the head in woodland, coastal and mountain locations I have not found this to be the case at all. The additional slots in my opinion far outweigh that risk.

I have also been mounting the Novoflex Castel-Micro motorised focusing rail on the CB5II with the Nikon D850 and 200mm micro nikkor lens in combination with the additional MD18 battery drive. I positioned the setup off the vertical axis to about 45° with the locking lever fully engaged. The overall combined setup is heavy and I was impressed by the CB5II performance; even at magnifications beyond life-size, there was no creep or sagging during the shooting process. I also used Live View to test for this as well, but nothing I could detect. For me, this was a real game-changer! I often found with other equally expensive heads some degree of creep; this can cause issues especially if using extended depth of field; accurate framing and stability are critical factors especially when working at magnifications beyond life-size.

Another interesting comparison for me was the excellent damping effect of the head. In macro, it is not always possible to shoot with the mirror locked up for various reasons. I found no discernible difference between images photographed with the mirror lockup engaged or disengaged; this was another shortcoming I often found in other ball heads. The CB5II damping capabilities are really excellent.

The durability of the colour anodising on the head itself is impressive. Most manufactures of photographic equipment tend to opt for black or grey, but I usually find within a short period of time scratches begin to appear as a result of use which is an accepted fact. However, I've been using the CB5II for a few months now in the field in a wide range of locations from mountains to woods. I have not detected any noticeable marks or scratches that have appeared on the head which is remarkable.

## A FINAL WORD

There is no doubt the CB5II is an impressive ball head. It easily measures up to the professional standards that you would expect from such a well-designed and crafted product. The solid construction of the head and its component parts indicate that it should give many years of service without any major issues. I should also state that I have not been polishing or wrapping it in cotton wool. In my opinion, equipment is to be used to get the job done. Having said that I don't abuse or treat it carelessly either, it has a job to do and it should be capable of functioning in the conditions it's designed for and in all types of weather.

The uniqueness of the CB5II warrants the price tag in my opinion and surpasses the competitors in its class. The old adage of 'buy cheap buy twice' comes to mind; having made that mistake myself in the past. It is well worth going the extra mile for a quality product. Having purchased several heads over the years this one outperforms all of them for many of the reasons already stated. The extra slots and the controlled friction pre-sets and panoramic capability are what really sets this head in a class of its own.

Although Novoflex is renowned for creative innovation and doing things their way. Thinking outside the box, rather than following a conventional approach is what defines innovation in my opinion. The engineers at Novoflex in this case have ventured to be different as they often do and the result is a top-of-the-range product that sets it apart from others.



# *Further Information*

---



Scarlet Elf Cup Fungus *Sarcoscypha occinea*

Further information on the ClassicBall 5 II can be obtained through Speed Graphic who are the UK distributors for Novoflex products, or Novoflex Germany. Contact details are as follows:

**Speed Graphic**

Speed Graphic Mail Order Ltd  
Unit 9A Oakhanger Farm Business Park  
Oakhanger  
BORDON  
GU35 9JA

Tel: 01420 560066  
From outside the UK +44 1420 560066  
Email; [enquiries@speedgraphic.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@speedgraphic.co.uk)  
<https://www.speedgraphic.co.uk>



**NOVOFLEX** NOVOFLEX Präzisionstechnik GmbH  
Brahmsstr. 7  
D-87700 Memmingen  
Germany

Tel.: +49 8331 88888  
Fax: +49 8331 47174  
Email: [mail@novoflex.de](mailto:mail@novoflex.de)





Taiwanese Squeaking Silkmoth *Rhodinia verecunda*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to Martin Grahl at Novoflex for his help and advice regarding the equipment and also David Johnson at Speed Graphic UK for assistance on organising the sample.

Robert Thompson is a professional freelance natural history photographer, author and naturalist. He is a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and the Irish Photographic Federation; an acclaimed macro specialist in the UK and author of a number of books on natural history and photography. His work is widely published in the UK, Ireland and internationally, with numerous photographic credits in a wide variety of publications and other media sources. He is a frequent writer and contributor to the photographic press and other natural history publications; has had several solo exhibitions of his work. He runs workshops in Ireland and Europe and has a special interest in insects and the declining wild orchid populations in his own country and further afield.

[www.robertthompsonphotography.com](http://www.robertthompsonphotography.com)





[www.novoflex.de](http://www.novoflex.de)