



CHRIS PACKHAM ON DIGISCOPING

IN ASSOCIATION WITH 

I FIRST started trying to take photographs through my Bausch & Lomb Discoverer scope back in 1982. The photographs were truly appalling.

More than 20 years on, digiscoping brought new life to using a scope as a telephoto lens, so I had to give it a try. After a few abortive attempts using a range of scopes and cameras, I eventually got a Nikon Coolpix 4500 and a Nikon Fieldscope EDII. At last I managed to get some good results. Using this set-up, the images were bright and sharp and I managed to get some pictures which I could never have obtained on any 35mm equipment.

The appeal of digiscoping is quite simple – the extraordinary magnification, which is not available using conventional photographic equipment. The quality of modern scope optics is superb. I use a Nikon Fieldscope ED82 these days, because its 82mm front element allows lots of light in. Sometimes, I use a Nikon ED50, too. Now, at last, I can use these optics in conjunction with these little digital cameras to take pictures of the distant creatures I have fantasised about photographing for many years.



Of course, there are restrictions and problems, but by recognising them, they can either be avoided or overcome. The biggest drawback is vibration, usually caused by the wind. When using the magnification levels needed for digiscoping, even the smallest breath of a breeze is enough to soften an image. This can be very frustrating, and you will find yourself hiding behind car doors, deckchairs and ladies' toilets to find any small shelter from the gusts. ▶



Digiscoping allowed Chris to take this shot of Mountain Gorilla's at sufficient distance to allow the shy animals to be relaxed.



The vignetting effect enhances the framing through the dense trees of this Cock-of-the-rock.

Chris Packham's top five tips to help you get better digscoped images

- Get yourself a good-quality geared head for your tripod. Normal tripod heads used for telescopes are not sufficiently tight when you lock them off. Geared heads are no good for normal scoping but really do the trick when it comes to centering subjects for digiscoping.
- Purchase and always carry a double thickness sheet of black velvet, about one metre square. However bright your screen is, you'll never see it clearly enough. Throwing the velvet over your head and the camera saves you having to disconnect the camera from the tripod (in order to stick it up your coat to see what you've actually photographed).
- Don't delete pictures in the field. The small screens are sometimes still not good enough to discern how sharp your picture is, so its always worth saving everything until you get it home.
- Always check that your eyepiece lens and the camera lens are very clean, particularly if you've been carrying them clamped together for some time. Few of the available mounts are dust-proof, and any dust that gets in will immediately result in really soft photos.
- Try to keep your tripod at its lowest elevation for maximum stability. Even the slightest movement is an image killer.

All pictures by Chris Packham



→ CHRIS PACKHAM ON DIGISCOPING

IN ASSOCIATION WITH 



Digiscoping can let you get amazing shots of insects, such as this Grasshopper in Cyprus.



This Cattle Egret is one of Chris's favourite digiscoped shots.

Even taking photos on the roadside can be perilous. Happily, I get consistently good results, because Nikon cameras and scopes are designed to work together and the mounts are custom-made.

Creative limitations

The basic difference between digiscoping and standard digital SLR photography is that you have far less flexibility when digiscoping. You cannot change your aperture, so you are always at the mercy of the shutter speed and a very small depth of field. Usually, digiscoping is only possible in bright light, too, which is often not the best light for creative photography. I find that shutter speeds at 1/250s or more are needed to freeze the subject.

For this reason, digiscoping often gives you the opportunity to record an image, while lacking the versatility to get photographs good enough to call 'pictures', when you're feeling creative. However, I am sure that technical improvements will soon reduce these limitations.

In terms of subjects, those which are still are clearly the easiest to get good images of, making perched or standing birds the prime targets. This is particularly true if they are clear of any vegetation, in the open and in bright light.

Favourite photos

My best ever digiscoped image is of an Eleonora's Falcon, which I took on the cliffs at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus. The bird was way beyond the reach of conventional lenses and, through predicting when it was about to stretch, I managed to capture the bird with its wings up over its head, looking as if it was just about to launch on a deadly mission. It's a little bit to the right of frame and the feet are sharper than the beak, but it made my companion sick to the skin, as his 400mm lens left him looking at a pinprick of the same moment!

Of course, subjects are only limited by your imagination and creativity. I have used digiscoping to photograph everything from lions to elephants. So don't hold back. Get out there and see what great images you can take.



Chris predicted when this Eleonora's Falcon would stretch into the pose he wanted. This shot would have been impossible without digiscoping.