

### Snap happy

Just starting photography or looking for a cost-effective back-up camera? **Mark Carwardine** went to the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust centre at Slimbridge to test some digital compacts.

**F**or anyone new to photography or in need of a quality back-up camera, a digital compact is an excellent place to start. And you don't need to re-mortgage your house to buy one. Digital compacts do have their limitations (in particular, the lenses are not interchangeable and there is often a significant delay between pressing the button and taking the picture), but they can be used for all sorts of wildlife photography.

There is a huge and rather baffling array of digital compacts on the market and the differences aren't always obvious. Narrow down your search by deciding what sort of pictures you want to take, ie whether you need a good zoom lens or a continuous shooting facility for action shots. Then, decide if you're happy to switch to auto and let the camera make all the decisions or whether you'd prefer more control, and you're ready to start shopping.

The prices of digital cameras are falling all the time, so shop around for a bargain. With technology developing at such speed, what seems to be the most efficient model today will soon be replaced by something else – so keep an eye out for otherwise decent cameras that have been discontinued. It's amazing what you can pick up for a bargain price if you time it right. And remember that bigger and more expensive cameras do not necessarily take better photographs – they can help, of course, but ultimately it's the photographer who takes the picture.

We've picked a selection of 6-8 megapixel compacts across a broad price range to demonstrate some of the options available. And beside each camera is a shot of a Slimbridge resident taken with that particular model, so you can see the results for yourself.

#### How we tested them

- **Specifications**  
A summary of maximum image size (megapixels), zoom capabilities and LCD size.
- **Ease of use**  
Were the cameras user-friendly? Were the controls easy to access and understand?
- **Picture quality**  
None of the cameras took poor-quality pictures, but some produced better exposures, sharpness and saturation than others.
- **Features**  
Did the cameras have enough special features to satisfy more demanding photographers?
- **Value for money**  
Rather than give the rrp, we give the typical street price for the cameras, but bear in mind these may vary considerably.

#### Our expert tester

BBC Wildlife columnist **Mark Carwardine** has been photographing wildlife and wild places for more than 20 years. His pictures – taken in more than 100 countries – have been published in books and magazines all over the world. He was chairman of the judges for this year's Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition.



### What does it all mean?

#### Megapixels

Pixels are the building blocks of a digital image, like single tiles in a mosaic, and one megapixel equals a million pixels. The more pixels you have, the sharper your images and the larger they can be printed. Current compact cameras have up to 8 megapixels (there are as many as 16 in some professional cameras), but 3 megapixels will print perfectly well up to postcard size. How many you need depends on how you will use your camera.

#### Zoom

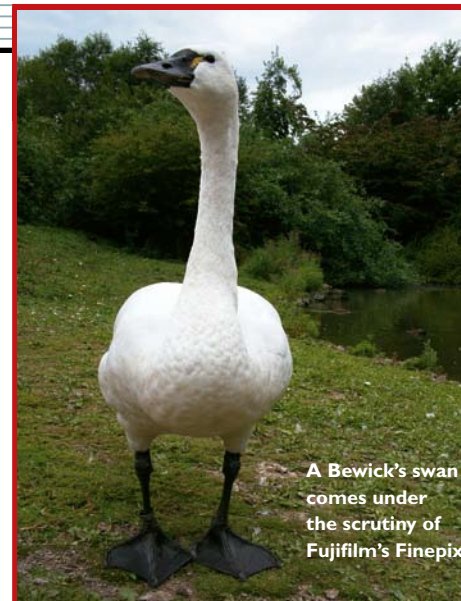
Compact cameras have both optical and digital zoom lenses, allowing you to zoom from wide-angle to telephoto (many have macro facilities, too, for extremely close focusing). Optical zoom is genuine magnification created by the lens itself, but digital zoom is produced artificially by the camera and there is a substantial loss in picture quality – it's really no different to zooming in on an image on your computer. The zoom figures given here are the 35mm equivalent.

#### LCD

Digital cameras have a liquid crystal display (LCD) that can be used instead of a traditional viewfinder for composing pictures. It also displays menu options and camera settings, and allows you to view photos already taken. Some LCD screens can tilt and twist, making it easier to shoot from a variety of unusual angles. They are measured, in inches, diagonally across the screen.

#### File type

There are three main file types: JPEGs compress files by discarding some of the original information. The level of compression can be varied, and if you set for 'fine' or 'high' resolution, you won't be able to detect the loss in quality. TIFFs are the standard file format, preserving all the original information but taking up more memory space. RAW files are digital images in their basic form, like negatives before printing. Professionals tend to shoot in RAW format, because files can be manipulated with no loss in quality, but JPEGs are suitable for most purposes.



A Bewick's swan comes under the scrutiny of Fujifilm's Finepix.

### Fujifilm FinePix S20 Pro £300

Fujifilm ☎ 0870 0841310; www.fujifilm.co.uk/digital

#### Specifications

- 6.2 megapixels
- 6x optical zoom (35-210mm)
- 1.8in LCD

#### Ease of use

- Chunky camera but quite good ergonomics
- Easy to use with logical menu

#### Picture quality

- Impressive pictures with good sharpness and colour

#### Features

- Stuffed full of features providing lots of flexibility

#### Value for money

- Second cheapest in this test and good value for money

#### Pros

- Plenty of override possibilities and settings for manual control
- Great pictures

#### Cons

- Fairly long shutter delay
- Slow focusing in some situations



ALL PRICES INCLUDE VAT



A female rosybill as seen by a Sony Cyber-shot.

### Sony Cyber-shot DSC-V3 £370

Sony ☎ 08705 111999; www.sony.co.uk

#### Specifications

- 7.2 megapixels
- 4x optical zoom (34-136mm)
- 2.5in LCD

#### Ease of use

- Tough build
- Good ergonomics
- Menu a bit fiddly

#### Picture quality

- Outstanding picture sharpness, though saturation and contrast are a bit over the top in some pictures

#### Features

- Plenty of useful features to keep advanced photographers happy

#### Value for money

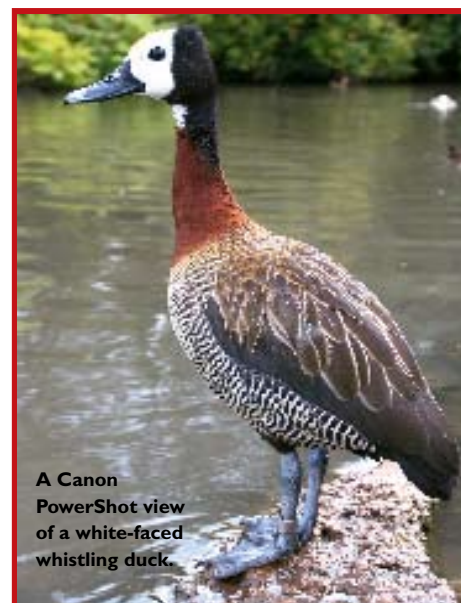
- Reasonable

#### Pros

- Superb build quality
- Largest LCD tested with good anti-reflective coating and great 'night-framing' mode
- Great pictures

#### Cons

- Poor optical viewfinder
- Over-saturation of images
- A little slow when shooting in TIFF mode



A Canon PowerShot view of a white-faced whistling duck.

### Canon PowerShot Pro I £480

Canon ☎ 08705 143723; www.canon.co.uk

#### Specifications

- 8 megapixels
- 7x optical zoom (28-200mm)
- 2in LCD

#### Ease of use

- Great ergonomics
- Some controls fiddly, electronic zoom not as easy as a rocker button
- Sensibly laid out menu

#### Picture quality

- Superb pictures with excellent colour rendition, tonal range and sharpness

- Excess 'noise' over ISO 100.

#### Features

- Excellent range of accessories

#### Value for money

- Expensive but good value for more advanced photographers

#### Pros

- Built like a tank
- Vari-angle LCD
- Lots of features
- Stunning image quality

#### Cons

- Heaviest camera
- Viewfinder slow
- Some controls fiddly
- Zoom frustrating





A mute swan captured on Nikon's Coolpix 7900 compact.

### Nikon Coolpix 7900 £270

Nikon ☎ 0845 4500155; www.nikon.co.uk

#### Specifications

- 7.1 megapixels
- 3x optical zoom (38-114mm)
- 2in LCD

#### Ease of use

- Tough build
- Enlarged, comfortable grip
- Controls easy to adjust

#### Picture quality

- Surprisingly good images, with perfect sharpness and good detail

#### Features

- Some non-auto features for more demanding photographers

#### Value for money

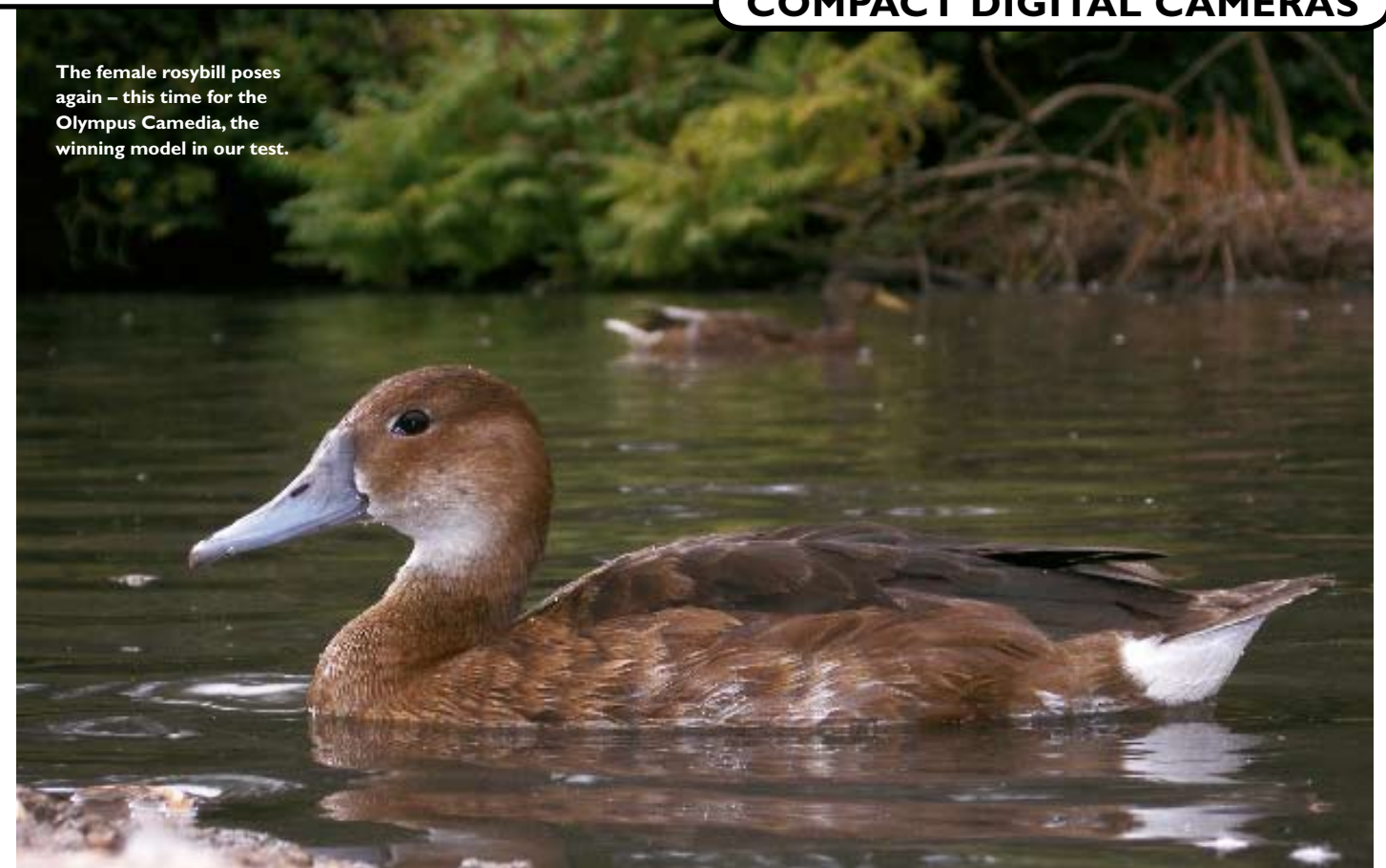
- Cheapest camera tested and excellent value for money

#### Pros

- Wonderfully small size
- Good looks, tough build
- Easy to use with logical menu system
- Great pictures

#### Cons

- Mainly automatic with preset controls
- Slow to start-up
- JPEG-only files



The female rosybill poses again – this time for the Olympus Camedia, the winning model in our test.



The white-faced whistling duck, this time snapped by a Pentax Optio.

### Pentax Optio 750Z £310

Pentax ☎ 01753 792721; www.pentax.co.uk

#### Specifications

- 7 megapixels
- 5x optical zoom (37.5-187.5mm)
- 1.8in LCD

#### Ease of use

- No grip to ease handling
- Menu logical and easy to use

#### Picture quality

- Excellent, with crisp sharpness, though metering not always perfect in this test

#### Features

- Good choice of shooting controls
- Autofocus system with up to 49 selectable focus points

#### Value for money

- Reasonable

#### Pros

- Packed with features
- Exceptionally sophisticated focusing system
- Vari-angle LCD

#### Cons

- Rather old-fashioned appearance (though some may like retro design)
- Metering not always as accurate as others tested



## Overall winner

I was impressed with every camera in this review and they all took good pictures. I particularly liked the Nikon Coolpix 7900 for its impressively small size and, at the other end of the scale, the Canon PowerShot Pro I for being more like a professional SLR than a compact. So choosing just one winner was surprisingly difficult.

I've picked the Olympus Camedia (right) because it is such good value for money – the images are superb, there are lots of great features, it's easy to use and the price is very reasonable. It also benefits from various extras, such as a super wide-angle lens for landscapes and a vari-angle LCD.

The only thing I didn't like was its rather dated appearance, but that's

probably just me being a bit too fussy.



### Olympus Camedia C-7070WZ £400

Olympus ☎ 0207 2532772; www.olympus.co.uk

#### Specifications

- 7.1 megapixels
- 4x optical zoom (27-110mm)
- 1.8in LCD

#### Ease of use

- Nice rubberised grip
- Controls logical and mostly accessible
- Poor optical viewfinder

#### Picture quality

- High quality lens gives superb images with perfect exposure and good colour rendition, tonal range and sharpness

#### Features

- Good range of auto and manual controls

#### Value for money

- Excellent value for money

#### Pros

- Tough build, good handling and excellent performance

- Super wide-angle lens
- Fast and accurate focusing
- Vari-angle LCD
- Great pictures

#### Cons

- Rather unattractive out-of-date appearance
- Poor optical viewfinder



**BEST BUY**