

SLR cameras under £1,000

Looking for a serious digital camera without a scary price tag? Wildlife photographer **Mark Carwardine** puts the latest budget SLRs to the *BBC Wildlife* test.

IF YOU WANT to get into wildlife photography, a digital single lens reflex (SLR) camera is a must-have. It can utilise a wide range of lenses, provides control for creative picture-taking and is easy to use. Plus, prices are falling all the time, so there's no need to remortgage the house to get a semi-professional model.

There are many features to consider, but three in particular are relevant to wildlife photography. First is resolution – anything above 6 megapixels is fine for most purposes. Second is the motordrive – it must be capable of taking several pictures – or frames – a second (fps). And third is

the size of the buffer (the internal memory that stores photos before they are written to the memory card) – if this is too small, you'll miss shots waiting for it to clear.

Bear in mind that most budget digital SLRs have sensors that increase the effective focal length of the lens. So, a magnification factor of 1.5x turns a 300mm lens into a 450mm one, which is great for long-range shots but not so good for wide-angle work.

We've picked a selection of the best 6-10 megapixel digital SLRs available. Prices do vary widely depending on where you buy, so it is worth shopping around.

THE TEST

THE EXPERT



Chairman of the judges for the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition in 2005 and again in 2006, *BBC Wildlife* columnist Mark Carwardine has been photographing wildlife for publication in books and magazines for more than 20 years.

HOW WE TESTED THEM

EASE OF USE Were the cameras user-friendly? Were the controls easy to access and understand?

PICTURE QUALITY How good were the pictures? None of the cameras took poor quality images, but some produced better exposures, sharpness, white balance and saturation than others.

FEATURES Were there enough features to satisfy photographers who want to be more creative? Were they effective?

VALUE FOR MONEY Prices were taken from online store www.pixmania.co.uk and were for a package including a standard zoom lens.

DIGITAL DECODER

MEGAPIXELS Pixels are the building blocks of a digital image, like single tiles in a mosaic (one megapixel equals one million pixels). The more pixels you have, the sharper your images and the larger they can be printed. How many you need depends on how you will use your camera and what you plan to do with your images.

LCD Digital cameras have a Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) at the back, which allows you to view photos already taken and displays everything from menu options to a histogram of the image. LCDs are measured in inches, diagonally across the screen.

FILE TYPE There are three main picture file types. A JPEG compresses the file by discarding some of the original information (the level of compression can be varied). A TIFF is the standard file format – it preserves all the original file information but takes up more memory space. RAW is a file in its basic form, rather like a negative before printing. Professionals tend to shoot in RAW, because the files can be manipulated with little or no loss in quality, but JPEGs are suitable for many purposes.



CANON EOS 350D £537

☎ 0870 5143 723; www.canon.co.uk

» **Spec** 18-55mm lens, 8 megapixels, 1.8in LCD, shutter speeds 30-1/4000 sec, 3 fps motordrive, ISO 100-1600, built-in flash, buffer 14 JPEG (fine resolution), weight 485g

» **Ease of use** Compact and light with neatly laid out buttons and fast autofocus, but so small that some controls are rather fiddly.

» **Picture quality** Excellent picture quality, though some images can be soft, which can be solved by sharpening on the computer.

» **Features** Packed with features, including the ability to record JPEG and RAW simultaneously.

» **Value for money** Excellent.

Has a higher pixel count than its rivals, but there is little difference in picture quality. **8/10**



OLYMPUS E-500 £499

☎ 0800 072 0070; www.olympus.co.uk

» **Spec** 14-45mm lens, 8 megapixels, 2.5in LCD, shutter speeds 60-1/4000, 2.5 fps motordrive, ISO 100-400, built-in flash, buffer up to card capacity JPEG (fine resolution), weight 435g

» **Ease of use** Traditional-looking camera that is a delight to hold and use.

» **Picture quality** Well balanced exposures, vivid colours and good sharpness.

» **Features** Good manual override and fitted with the unique Olympus filter system that removes annoying dust spots from the sensor.

» **Value for money** Excellent.

A surprisingly advanced camera for the money, with a large LCD and great handling. **8.5/10**



PENTAX *ist DL £438

☎ 01753 792792; www.pentax.co.uk

» **Spec** 18-55mm lens, 6.1 megapixels, 2.5in LCD, shutter speeds 30-1/4000, 2.8 fps motordrive, ISO 200-3200, built-in flash, buffer 5 JPEG (fine resolution), weight 470g

» **Ease of use** Not very robust, but compact, uncluttered and easy to use. Autofocus can be a little slow compared to other models.

» **Picture quality** Good sharpness with vibrant colours, though sometimes overexposed.

» **Features** Limited choice of lenses, but considerable potential for manual override.

» **Value for money** Good but the less expensive Nikon D50 (right) is a comparable model.

Large LCD and ease of use makes this an excellent choice for digital beginners. **7/10**



SIGMA SD10 £549

☎ 01707 327822; www.sigma-imaging.co.uk

» **Spec** 18-50mm lens, 10.29 megapixels, 1.8in LCD, shutter speeds 15-1/6000, 2.5 fps motordrive, ISO 100-800, no built-in flash, buffer 6 RAW (high resolution), weight 785g

» **Ease of use** Control layout is logical and the menu simple to use. The viewfinder is quite dark, but does show what is about to enter the image (great for action photography). Slow compared with the other models.

» **Picture quality** Image quality is good.

» **Features** Special sensor turns 3.4 megapixels into 10.29. You can only take in RAW format.

» **Value for money** Reasonable.

A chunky camera that looks and feels old. **5/10**



NIKON D70s £742

☎ 0845 4500 155; www.nikon.co.uk

» **Spec** 18-70mm lens, 6.1 megapixels, 2in LCD, shutter speeds 30-1/8000, 3 fps motordrive, ISO 200-1600, built-in flash, buffer 9 JPEG (fine res), weight 600g

» **Ease of use** Delightful to use. The body feels solid and well built, the viewfinder is clear and sharp and the autofocus is fast and accurate. The buttons are neatly laid out and the on-screen menus are clear and simple.

» **Picture quality** Superb picture quality with vibrant colours, accurate exposure and spot-on sharpness.

» **Features** With a vast amount of control over picture taking, there is huge potential for creative genius.

» **Value for money** Superb.

The handling, features and performance of the Nikon D70s are all outstanding. It's also worth considering the Nikon D50 (best price £349), which is similar but has streamlined specifications. **9/10**



▼ The Nikon D50 looks like, and shares many features with, the D70s. There might not be enough creative adaptability for the keen photographer, but it has the same megapixel resolution (6.1) and comes as a standard package with a 18-55mm lens.



CHOOSING THE WINNER...

THE 'BUDGET' END of the digital SLR market is growing so fast that worldwide sales should reach 6 million this year. So it's not surprising to find the market swamped with a baffling choice of models and some impressive deals.

The five cameras I tested are representative of the wide range available and they all took perfectly acceptable pictures. However, the Sigma SD10 was too chunky and old-fashioned for my liking, though its low price for 10.29 effective megapixels makes it worth considering. I particularly liked the Pentax *ist DL for its simplicity – it's not the world's greatest camera but it's perfect for beginners. The Canon EOS 350D and the Olympus E-500 were fun to use and both were packed with

features. But I've picked the Nikon D70s – despite its relatively meagre 6.1 megapixels – because its handling, features and performance were all superb. It has a dazzling reputation among professional photographers and offers outstanding value for money.

BUT BEFORE YOU rush off and choose a digital SLR, a word of warning. Bear in mind that the cost of going digital is more involved than simply buying a camera. Of course, in the long term, you'll save a small fortune in film and processing costs, but don't forget to budget for lenses, memory cards, a card reader and portable storage device, a decent computer with image-editing software and a seemingly endless variety of other peripherals. It all adds up – but it's definitely worth it in the end.

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