

Superzoom Cameras - Are They Useful? — Phil Cole

I've had an interest in bird photography for a long time. Over the years I've gradually improved my equipment and bought better or at least longer lenses (300 and 400mm), but I've never been satisfied that the quality of my photos was anything but average. I look with interest and perhaps envy at the Nikon and Canon long lenses but haven't been prepared to take the financial plunge - maybe it's my technique, not my gear, and so I still wouldn't be able to improve my photography even if I bought better equipment. And lugging a DSLR with a long lens and a tripod is an effort.

Recently by chance I read some information on super zoom (or bridge) cameras. Now, this newsletter has published images, and very good ones, from such cameras, but I guess I haven't taken a lot of notice, and maybe I was a little dismissive of anything other than a DSLR. In any case, a web search on articles from superzoom camera users sparked my interest and I decided in the post-Christmas sale frenzy to buy one, as some good offers were around. All the major manufacturers produce these, with equivalent focal lengths of 600-1200mm or more. The two most regarded models seemed to be the Canon SX50 (50x optical zoom, 1200 mm equivalent) and the Panasonic Lumix FZ200 (24x optical zoom, 600 mm equivalent). I decided on the Lumix as it has a constant f2.8 Leica lens at all zoom



~1800mm (equiv), range ~10 metres, ISO 100, f4, 1/1600 s, slight crop

settings and was recommended by shop staff. In addition to the optical zoom, there is an additional in-camera digital 24x zoom capability that is claimed to not affect image quality, and further digital zooming to a total 74x, which by my calculation must be about 1800mm equivalent.

The camera can capture images in RAW or JPEG. The internal processing to produce the JPEG file seems very good, and I've used these files here rather than the RAW files, which do need some processing to get the image to the same quality. The camera also seems to have good anti-vibration technology and all shots here are handheld. I find it easy to hold the light camera quite stable, rather than managing a much larger, and heavier SLR. Start-up is quite fast. Battery life is very good. Opportunistic shots are much easier to get than with the bigger gear (grab and shoot!).



1800mm (equiv), range 20 metres,
ISO 100, f4, 1/1300s

So far, I'm impressed. My photos to my eye are much better than anything I've taken before. I've been very encouraged and have taken some hundreds of shots over the last month, far more than I would usually be taking and that's because the camera is easy to use and the results are pleasing.

There are some issues. The body feels flimsy and the documentation warns that it is not rustproof or waterproof. I find the digital viewfinder hard to use. It's easy to press some of the control buttons accidentally because they are crammed into a small space. The auto-focus can have difficulty in locking onto the specific intended point. At the longest zoom settings, locating the bird with the poor viewfinder can be a challenge. But I can live with or work around these limitations.



600mm (equiv), range 10 metres, ISO 100, f4, 1/1600s, some cropping



~1800mm (equiv), range 5 metres, ISO 100, f4, 1/640s

I've looked at whether it is better to magnify or crop images in the computer, or use the camera's digital zoom. Either can produce satisfactory results, within reason, but in-computer manipulation is probably a little better. It's also easier in the field to find the subject when the camera is at lesser zoom settings.



~ 600mm (equiv), range 20 metres, ISO 100, f4, 1/1600s, slight crop

So, if you want to take reasonable photos for an investment of less than \$600, consider a super-zoom. If your main interest is photos for identification, these are excellent - set to the maximum optical zoom, point in the general direction, and magnify if necessary in the computer. Don't expect the quality of top gear, but nevertheless I think it's pretty good.