

UserReport
Photographic

Kodak Professional Portra 400BW

Kodak's newest chromogenic black-and-white film is the best

Photos and text
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And now there are seven. Kodak recently added Portra 400BW to its Professional Portra film family to provide everything from tungsten to chromogenic black-and-white films. The Portra family includes Portra 100T, 160NC, 160VC, 400NC, 400VC, 800 and its newest member, 400BW.

Before we get into this new emulsion, we need to back up and explain the term "chromogenic." Basically, chromogenic films are black-and-white emulsions structured from color-negative film technology. This allows you to shoot very-fine-grain black-and-white images and process them in C-41 chemistry right along with other color-negative films. The concept isn't new; in fact, years ago

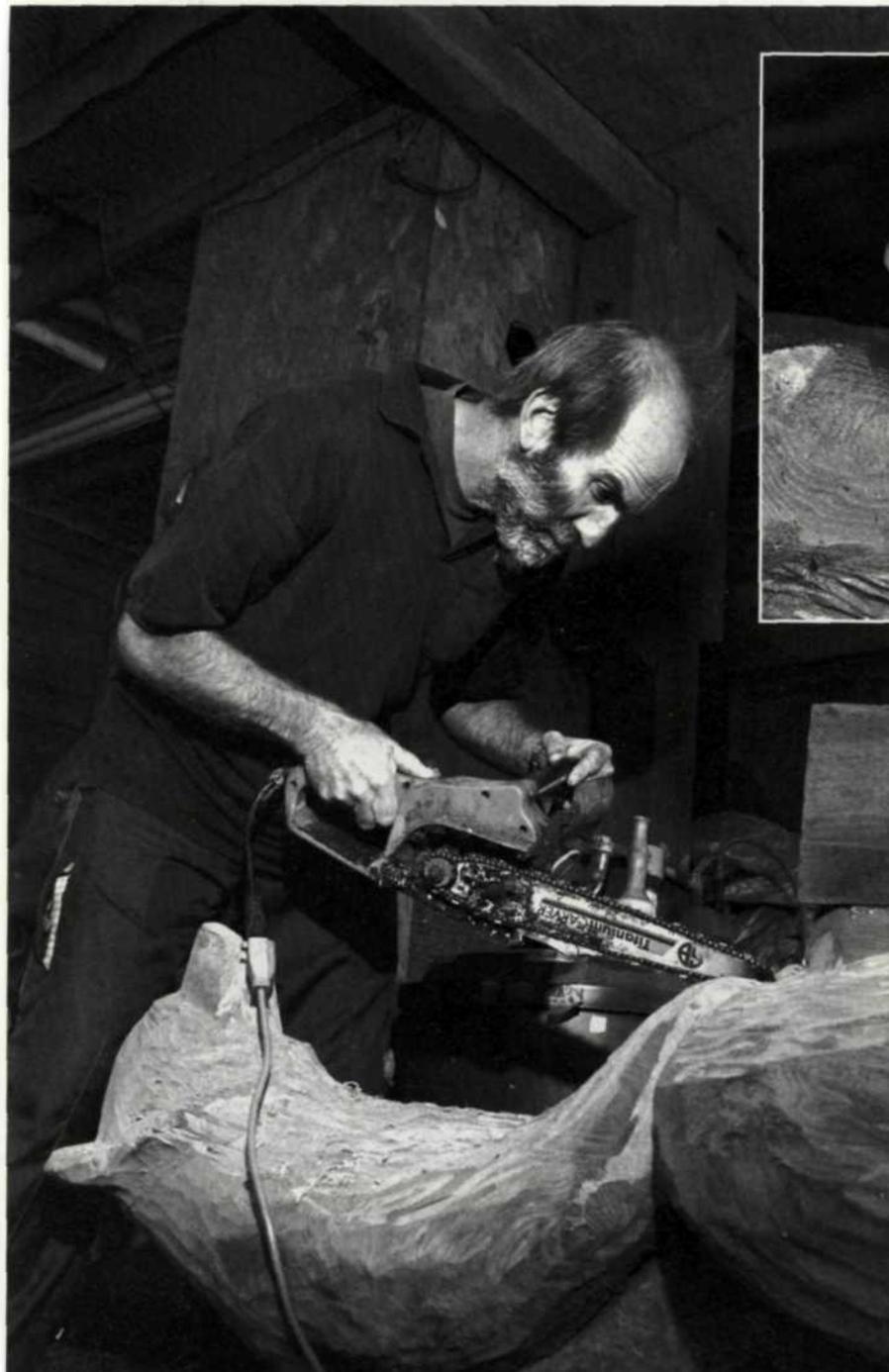


Fine grain, great detail, beautiful tonal range—not bad for an ISO 400 black-and-white film (and one you can get processed at any handy one-hour lab!).

Dr. Charles Wycoff came up with the idea when he worked for a company called EG&G. The first chromogenic film was called Extended Range and was made by Eastman Kodak for EG&G.

Over the years several variations of chromogenic films have appeared. Kodak offered T-Max T400 CN, a multi-purpose black-and-white film

processed in C-41 chemistry, designed to print on silver-halide photographic paper. The new Portra 400BW film takes chromogenic film one step further as it is designed to be printed on color printing paper along with its color-negative counterparts. In fact, Kodak doesn't even recommend printing Portra negatives on traditional black-and-white paper.



Professional Portra 400BW's wide exposure latitude came in really handy for these available-light shots of wood-carver Brian McEneny at work, and of an example of his work. Note the beautiful tonal range, and the detail throughout the harshly lit scenes (although it may not fully reproduce on the magazine page). As a portrait film Portra 400BW has a softer-than-normal contrast that makes it ideal for photographing a wide range of subjects besides formal portraits. If you're interested in black-and-white and lack a darkroom, give this film a try!



The most interesting part of this emulsion is its five-stop exposure latitude that doesn't require any processing adjustments. That's right, the film can be rated anywhere from EI 50 to EI 1600 and processed along with all your other C-41 films. If that weren't incentive enough to try it, keep in mind that this film has T-Grain emulsions featuring extremely fine grain and exceptional sharpness. Wow!

So, where's the down side? The only problem we could really see was the appearance of the processed film. The film base appears light tan and we found it difficult to discern whether we had a good image or not without printing the negative. This wasn't really a problem since we just printed a proof sheet or scanned the images

into the computer for output.

That brings us to another topic regarding this new emulsion. If you have ever tried to scan traditional black-and-white film, you probably were frustrated with the results. Often the contrast was wrong, the grain was exaggerated, and the quality wasn't even close to what you achieved with traditional printing. Thankfully Portra 400BW solves these problems, as it is perfect for scanning. The results we obtained with our new Nikon Super Coolscan 4000 ED scanner were outstanding.

With every film test we conduct for *PHOTOgraphic Magazine*, we first take a jaunt through the tech sheets before heading off for photo adventure. No, it isn't very exciting, but it gives us some immediate insight on the film emulsion's composition. We found Portra 400BW had a sharpness rating of Extremely High and an extremely

fine RMS Granularity of 9. This emulsion sports the Kodak T-Grain crystals, which have been the foundation of most Kodak emulsions today. The characteristic curve covers a wide range and Portra 400BW's minimum density levels were improved over the T400 CN emulsion.

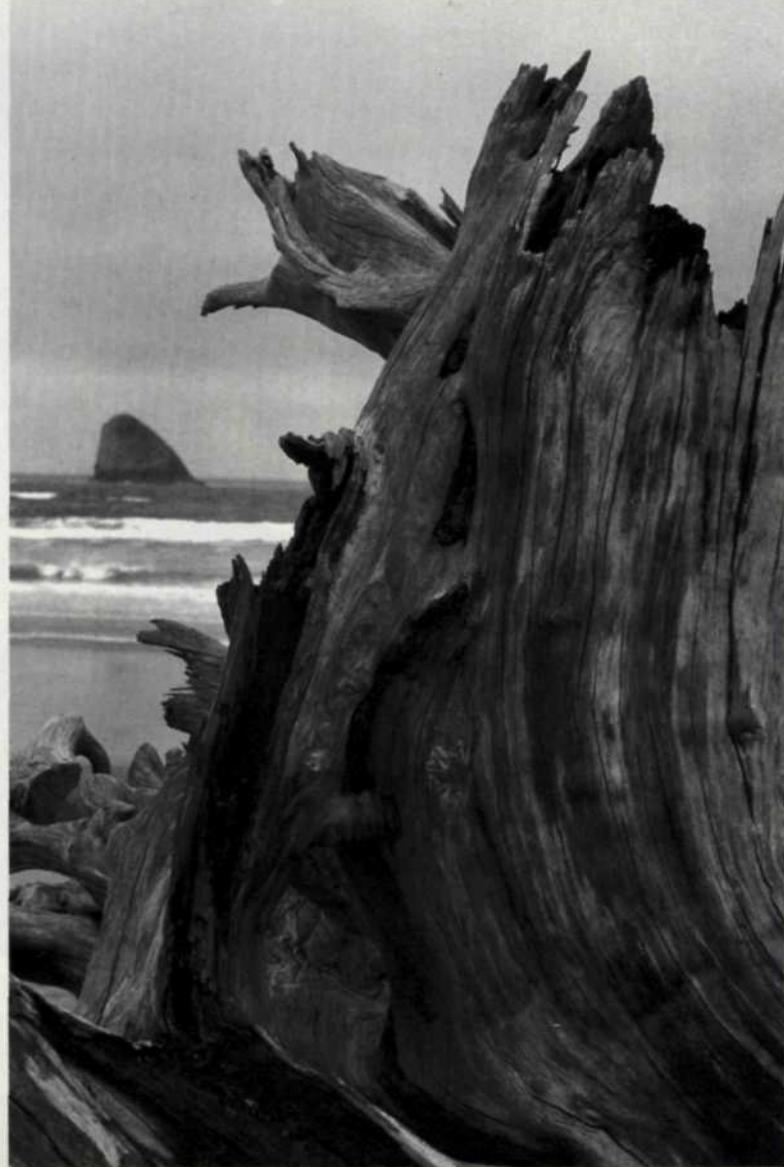
Professional Portra 400BW can be used in virtually any type of mixed lighting conditions with or without exposure corrections. Both color or black-and-white filters can be used the same as with any standard silver-based black-and-white emulsion. Portrait photographers can retouch on either side of the 120 and 220 emulsions but the 35mm can only be retouched on the emulsion side. This film has been designed to provide excellent latent image keeping and the same archival properties as other color-negative films.

For our initial field tests, we checked Portra 400BW's film speed and exposure latitude using tree frogs as models. We have photographed them before on color film, and thought they would provide excellent portraits if we used harsh strobe lighting. Nowhere on the film box does it say that the portraits have to be of people. Besides, frogs smile better than people, especially after you feed them a couple of flies.

We found that ISO 400 seemed to be the best film

Right: While scenic photographers generally turn to slow films for their great sharpness and fine grain, Portra 400BW does a great job with landscapes (and seascapes). Image quality and tonal range are excellent—even better than those of Kodak T-Max T400 CN chromogenic film.

Below: Portra 400BW's ISO 400 speed comes in handy when your "landscape" subjects move.



speed although exposures at -2 and +3 gave us very good negatives, too. It was even hard to tell the -2-stop negative from the +3-stop negative when the images were scanned, although straight prints on color paper did show a slight contrast difference.

For our film tests, we decided to head down the coast and capture the coastal flavor. We grabbed a few exposures of salty scenes, bridges that spanned the harbors, people fishing, nets and just about anything that illustrated life in a beach town.

We didn't just amble aimlessly, as we had a destination in mind. Over the years we have enjoyed the wood carving skills of Brian McEneny from Seal Rock, Oregon. He uses a chain saw for much of his wood working where he transforms logs and exotic woods into showpieces. His specialty is sea life with lifelike forms of whales, otters and dolphins, although he still carves the ever-popular bears.

We felt that photographing him in action would be a great challenge for Portra 400BW. Our job wasn't easy as the lighting in his workshop was a mixed bag of light sources—sunlight, open shade, and fluorescent lights. The background contained dust, wood chips, chain saws, and other assorted cutting tools. The lighting in the main shop was so low that we decided to add more control by using a couple of small slave flash units. We worked the

When fine detail is important, no need to switch to slow film with minimal depth of field: Portra 400BW provides lots of detail, and lots of depth of field. Kodak recommends having the negatives printed on standard color papers, so your usual color lab can make your prints. The images for this article were scanned from Portra 400BW negatives, using a Nikon Super Coolscan 4000 ED desktop scanner.



scene for 15–20 minutes knocking off 3–4 four rolls of film, and then finished with several wide brackets of finished pieces in the gallery and outside in full sunlight.

The film is processed, so sound the drum roll! The results from this film are . . . spectacular! What else can we say? The images featured a wide exposure latitude, very fine grain and a tonal range most photographers can only dream of. The detail this emulsion captures is incredible, which provides unlimited image control. It was great to be able to process this black-and-white film right along with our other color-negative films. No more lengthy hours in the darkroom as we can now print

these black-and-white images right along with color negatives on the same color paper. It is easy to obtain neutral-toned black-and-white prints with Portra, Supra and Ultra III color papers.

Professional Portra 400BW film expands your artistic creativity. It is the perfect film choice for portraits, weddings and most any commercial application. This new member of Kodak's expanded Portra film family allows us all to capture the black-and-white world with the convenience of color.

For more information, contact Eastman Kodak Co., 343 State St., Rochester, NY 14650; 800/242-2424; www.kodak.com. ■