

Taming the Battery Beast

Digital cameras have a ravenous appetite for power. That's why choosing the right battery is critical.

BY JACK & SUE DRAFAHL

Digital cameras are taking the world by storm. You can now find them in every shape, size, color and resolution. They are showing up at birthday parties and on family vacations, and some have even made the plunge underwater.

Sadly, though, these cameras share a common drawback — they have an insatiable appetite for batteries. These power-hungry beasts can drain a set of batteries in one sitting.

Not to worry; we've got some practical tips for taming these battery gluttons.

Despite claims by manufacturers, alkaline batteries just can't handle the power demands of digital cameras. NiCad batteries are rechargeable, but even high-capacity ones have a tough time handling the high drain of digital. Lithium batteries work very well, especially in cold weather, and have a long shelf life. The problem is that they are very expensive and are generally not rechargeable.

The best solution is called NiMH batteries, short for nickel metal hydride. They feature twice the staying power of NiCad batteries and almost four times that of alkaline. And since NiMH batteries are rechargeable, you can use them over and over again.

The capacity rating for NiMH batteries

is measured in milliamp-hours (mAh). This gauges how much electric current a battery can put out and for how long. Due to the high power demand of digital cameras, we suggest you stay between 1,300 and 1,800 mAh. Batteries with higher capacity ratings have longer life, but they also cost more.

NiMH batteries are delicate and can be damaged if they are dropped. They also pack a kick if shorted out, so proper storage and shipping considerations are essential.

We recommend buying three matched sets of NiMH batteries for your digital underwater camera. Don't intermix mAh ratings or brands of batteries in your sets. Label them so that each set gets used and charged together. Three sets allow you to have one group in the camera ready to dive, one fully charged set ready when you need it and another being charged.

Change batteries after every dive. This way you can keep the monitor on to view your images as you expose them, or zoom to your heart's content without the fear of the dreaded "low battery" warning.

Send questions to digitalduo@jackandsuedraahl.com and we will try to answer them directly or in an upcoming column. 