



CURRENT ISSUE

From the Archives

Recent Additions

[Accessories](#)
[Buyer's Guides](#)
[Digital Cameras](#)
[Digital Peripherals](#)
[Film](#)
[Film Cameras](#)
[Lenses](#)
[Monthly Contest](#)
[Photo Techniques](#)
[Point and Shoot](#)
[Travel Photography](#)

Site Features

[▶ Photo Links](#)
[▶ Vote](#)
[▶ Previous Votes](#)
[▶ Previous News](#)
[▶ Classifieds](#)
[▶ Photo Store](#)

Past Issues

2003

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	June
July	Aug	Sept
Oct	Nov	Dec

2002

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	June
July	Aug	Sept
Oct	Nov	Dec

Photo Offers

[▶ Digital Photo Printing](#)
[▶ Digital Photo Camera](#)
[▶ Digital Imaging](#)
[▶ Kodak DC4800](#)
[▶ Zoom Camera](#)

PETERSEN'S
PHOTO
 graphic



[Home/News](#)
[Subscribe](#)
[Give a Gift](#)
[Subscriber Services](#)
[Photo Store](#)

From the Archives

30 Great 35mm Films

Jack and Sue Drafafl, May, 2002

The best of today's batch

In celebration of *Photographic Magazine's* 30 years, we were asked to compile a list naming 30 of the best 35mm films available today. It sounded like an easy task at first, but as we worked to assemble the list, we had a hard time limiting the number to just 30 films. We have been reviewing film for *Photographic Magazine* for 20 of those 30 years and during that time we have tested some great emulsions. There are now more than 100 film flavors designed to handle just about every photo situation possible, so how could we possibly choose?



Our first step was to group the slide, color-negative and black-and-white films, and then select the top films from each group. Since more than 97% of the images today are taken on color-negative film, it proved to be the most difficult group to weed down. We had to consider some of the new directions film has taken in the past few years, like film families. The film-family concept enables photographers to choose

various film speeds from emulsions sharing like film technologies. Film families, like Kodak Supra, Fujifilm Superia and Agfa Vista, allow you to match the film to the light level and still maintain continuity in your results. Some emulsions also feature additional variations such as lower or higher color saturation. For example, Kodak offers Portra 400NC (natural color) and Portra 400VC (vivid color) to provide film solutions for all types of portrait applications. All these options are great for the photographer, but sure made our final decision a bit tougher.

It seems that there has been an increased interest in black-and-white photography as a creative art form. Higher-speed films boasting tighter grain patterns and smoother tonal ranges have brought many photographers back into the world of black-and-white. The chromogenic black-and-white films, the ones that are processed in standard C-41 color-negative chemistry, have helped encourage many black-and-white shooters back into the fold.

Photographic film has also taken on new meaning with the introduction of digital photography. Just as the digital camera collects data using bytes of electronic information, film can now be considered a permanent chemical storage device that uses silver halide crystals to collect its data. Thanks to film scanners, images on films of all types are now being converted to digital. New scanner technologies enable emulsion scratches to be removed and grain to be reduced. There are even bulk scanning devices, so you can convert entire rolls of film to digital at once. For the most part, films convert well to digital and it keeps getting easier and better.

The RMS rating indicates a film's relative graininess. A film with a RMS of 5 is twice as grainy as one with a rating of 4. You can compare RMS values (assuming the manufacturer provides them) between two print films or two slide films, but you can't directly compare RMS values between slide and print film. If you multiply a print

Magazine

Article Index

[Page 1](#)
[Page 2](#)
[Page 3](#)
[Page 4](#)

[Digital Camera HQ: See prices and reviews of digital cameras.](#)



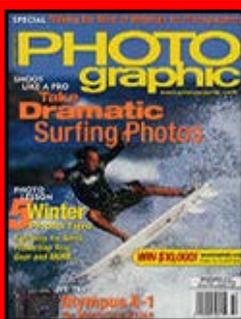
film's RMS rating by 2.5, you can then compare its graininess to a slide film's rating. To make matters tougher, one manufacturer has switched to a Print Grain Index (PGI), and which there is no correlation between PGI and RMS.

We consider a film test to be more than just analyzing layers of color dye, silver-halide crystals, film backing, and all that makes up today's complex films. Most new films have a niche, a preference, or a specific field of photography for which they are best suited. When a new film comes in for review, we look at its specifications, preferred application, and each film test is a new adventure for us. Your film selection will depend mostly on your subject matter and shooting style. Take a look at our samples and the brief synopses of our 30 top films. Hopefully they will help in your film-purchasing decisions. (The following list includes color-print films, then color-slide films, then black-and-white films. In each category, the films are listed from slowest to fastest, in alphabetical order by manufacturer.)

All photos by Jack and Sue Drafahl unless otherwise noted.

Go To [Page 2](#)





CURRENT ISSUE

From the Archives

Recent Additions

- Accessories
- Buyer's Guides
- Digital Cameras
- Digital Peripherals
- Film
- Film Cameras
- Lenses
- Monthly Contest
- Photo Techniques
- Point and Shoot
- Travel Photography

Site Features

- ▶ Photo Links
- ▶ Vote
- ▶ Previous Votes
- ▶ Previous News
- ▶ Classifieds
- ▶ Photo Store

Past Issues

2003

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	June
July	Aug	Sept
Oct	Nov	Dec

2002

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	June
July	Aug	Sept
Oct	Nov	Dec

Photo Offers

- ▶ Digital Photo Printing
- ▶ Digital Photo Camera
- ▶ Digital Imaging
- ▶ Kodak DC4800
- ▶ Zoom Camera

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[Home/News](#) [Subscribe](#) [Give a Gift](#) [Subscriber Services](#) [Photo Store](#)

From the Archives



Print . . .

Konica Impresa 50

ISO 50 • RMS 4

Impresa 50 provides some of the finest grain and highest sharpness found in any color-print film today. This professional film delivers superb image quality, accurate color reproduction, even contrast and fine grain. Impresa 50

achieves a tonal range that covers highlights to shadows. This is the perfect film choice for landscapes and pictorials.



Fujicolor Superia 100

ISO 100 • RMS 4

Fujicolor Superia 100 incorporates Fuji's 4th emulsion layer for exceptionally realistic colors, even under fluorescent lighting. Fuji labels this as its sunlight film, so it is intended for outdoor use where lighting is plentiful. This is the perfect choice for landscapes, general-

purpose photography and portraits with flash fill. Superia 100 naturally features fine grain, color brilliance, extreme sharpness and higher contrast.



Agfa Vista 100

ISO 100 • RMS 4

Agfa recently introduced its Vista 35mm color-negative film line which replaced HDC Plus print films. Vista features Eye Vision Technology which sensitizes the emulsion to provide more precise colors to better represent the perception of the human eye. The result is even better

color reproduction, especially blues, greens, pastels and under fluorescent lighting. The entire film family, from ISO 100 to 800, shows reduced grain structure and improved image sharpness.



Kodak Professional Supra 100

ISO 100 • PGI 28

Kodak designed the Supra films for anyone looking to capture images featuring bold, dynamic colors. These emulsions offer fine grain and excellent sharpness so you can make extreme enlargements. Professional Ektrapers PJI100 film was renamed Professional

Supra 100. It continues to provide extremely fine grain because of its Enhanced Cubic Grain Technologies. Supra 100 features excellent sharpness with bold, yet true-to-life colors.

Kodak Royal Gold 100

ISO 100 • PGI 28

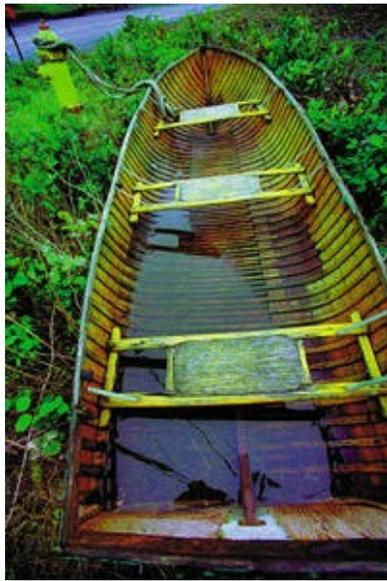
Magazine

Article Index

- Page 1
- Page 2
- Page 3
- Page 4

[Digital Camera HQ: See prices and reviews of digital cameras.](#)





This fine emulsion takes the best technologies of past ISO 100 films and incorporates them into one high quality, medium-speed color print film. It features a wide exposure latitude of 3 stops over and 2 under to guarantee you never miss a special moment. Royal Gold 100 provides fine grain, excellent sharpness, accurate color reproduction and excellent flesh tones.



Fujicolor NPS 160

ISO 160 • RMS 4

Fujicolor NPS Professional 160 excels because it has a lower contrast level than many of the high-saturation color-

negative films available today. This lower contrast level provides better control over the scene contrast levels, which is so important when capturing white wedding dresses and black tuxedos. NPS 160's four-layer emulsion is part of Fujifilm's Real-Tone Technology designed to reproduce colors as they are seen by the human eye. The film speed is a true ISO 160, with an exposure latitude that expands over a seven-stop range.



Agfacolor Portrait XPS 160

ISO 160 • RMS 3.5

As its name implies, Agfacolor Portrait XPS 160, features restrained color saturation which makes it perfect for portrait work. Its subdued saturation produces softened colors, superb skin tones and soft contrast. Because of its lower contrast, Portrait XPS 160 can suppress strong colors or contrasts and capture the optimum tonal range. It also features exceptional granularity and image quality.

Photo by Ron Leach



Agfa Optima II 200

ISO 200 • RMS 4.3

Optima II 200 concentrates on improvements to grain, color fidelity, and an increased tonal range at the lower end of the curve. Using a technology called SEM crystals (SEM = Surface Enhanced Multistructured), Agfa enlarged the surface area of the

crystals thereby decreasing the amount of crystals needed to maintain the same ISO. These new improvements also increase the stability of the gray tones, which makes it easier to balance color prints. Flesh tones are very accurate. The colors in the shadows offer great saturation and images taken in mixed lighting balance easily.

Fujicolor Superia X-TRA 400

ISO 400 • RMS 4



This film offers a great combination of high speed and image quality. It incorporates Fuji's 4th Color Layer Technology that adds a cyan-sensitive layer which enables it to work well in mixed lighting situations. Superia X-TRA 400 features remarkably fine grain for its

high speed and has the same RMS granularity rating as many 100-speed films. This film has intense, saturated colors, crisp contrast and excellent exposure latitude. It's perfect for low light action photography and extends the range of your electronic flash.



Kodak MAX Versatility 400

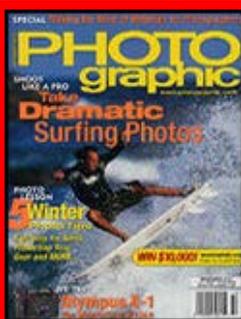
ISO 400 • PGI 49

This film can be named Kodak's most versatile 400-speed film. Max Versatility 400 utilizes technology that lets it "see colors much as the human eye does," resulting in very accurate color reproduction. It features improved color

accuracy, better saturation, and reduced color shifts due to high temperature or humidity. Its increased film speed allows the 100- or 200-speed film point-and-shooters an increased ratio of great photos.

Go To [Page 3](#)





CURRENT ISSUE

From the Archives

Recent Additions

- Accessories
- Buyer's Guides
- Digital Cameras
- Digital Peripherals
- Film
- Film Cameras
- Lenses
- Monthly Contest
- Photo Techniques
- Point and Shoot
- Travel Photography

Site Features

- ▶ Photo Links
- ▶ Vote
- ▶ Previous Votes
- ▶ Previous News
- ▶ Classifieds
- ▶ Photo Store

Past Issues

2003

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	June
July	Aug	Sept
Oct	Nov	Dec

2002

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	June
July	Aug	Sept
Oct	Nov	Dec

Photo Offers

- ▶ Digital Photo Printing
- ▶ Digital Photo Camera
- ▶ Digital Imaging
- ▶ Kodak DC4800
- ▶ Zoom Camera

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Magazine

[Home/News](#) [Subscribe](#) [Give a Gift](#) [Subscriber Services](#) [Photo Store](#)

From the Archives



Kodak Portra 400VC

ISO 400 • PGI 43

This is one of the faster members of Kodak's pro Portra film line. Portra 400VC provides vivid color reproduction while its counterpart Portra 400NC produces natural color. The high film speed makes these films perfect for portrait, fashion and weddings. Portra 400VC provides good results under fluorescent and mixed lighting. It has improved scanning characteristics, excellent flesh tones, true ISO 400 film speed, and produces great image quality.



Fujicolor NPZ 800

ISO 800 • RMS 5

Fujicolor Portrait Film NPZ 800 Professional is a very-high-speed ISO 800 color-negative film that doesn't sacrifice image quality. It renders colors as close as possible to natural subject color which makes it a great portrait film. The wide exposure latitude of NPZ

800 (-2 to +4 stops) allows you versatility and the 4th Color Layer Technology allows photographers to work easily in a variety of lighting situations. The Fine (Sigma) Technology increases film sensitivity while reducing processed grain size, giving you a smooth tonal gradation throughout the image.

Kodak Portra 800

ISO 800 • PGI 50

This superfast emulsion uses Kodak's patented T-Grain technology that boasts high speed, very fine grain, and a spectacular ability to capture extreme lighting conditions. Don't let the word Portra fool you. Kodak decided that if they could create a film that produced great portraits in all kinds of lighting, the film would handle just about every other difficult lighting challenge. The Advanced Development Accelerator assures fine grain enabling you to produce bigger enlargements and scans.

Article Index

- Page 1
- Page 2
- Page 3
- Page 4

[Digital Camera HQ: See prices and reviews of digital cameras.](#)





Fujicolor Superia 1600

ISO 1600 • RMS 7

This high-speed color-negative emulsion utilizes Fuji's 4th Color Layer and Fine (Sigma) Crystal Technology. Fuji found that most films with the standard color sensitive layers of red, green and blue didn't always see the color the same way as the human eye.



This extra layer (introduced in Fujicolor Reala) compensated for some of these problems, especially in the green end of the spectrum. Its wide exposure latitude allows Superia 1600 to work well in a wide variety of lighting situations and it has remarkably fine grain for its ISO 1600 film speed.

Slide . . .

Kodak Ektachrome Professional Infrared EIR

ISO varies

Ektachrome Infrared false-color slide film is sensitive to infrared radiation and visible wavelengths. This current version uses standard E-6 processing, or can be cross-processed in C-41 to produce

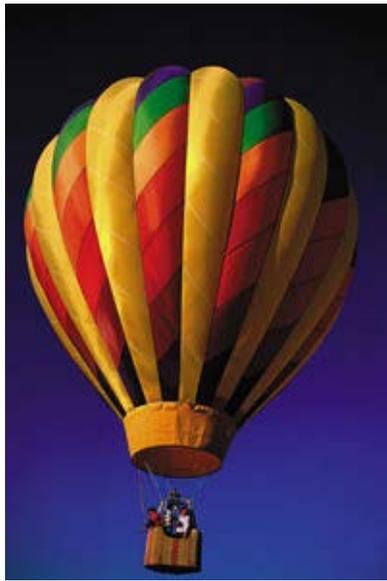


negatives. When exposed through colored filters, Infrared EIR yields weird false-color effects. You may get magenta foliage, green skies, and things that were once blue, now image as black. Touchy on exposure, so be sure to bracket your images.

Fujichrome Velvia

ISO 50 • RMS 9

Velvia (film ID RVP) was one of the first E-6 films that could compete with the image quality of Kodachrome 25. This extremely high-resolution, very-fine-grain, high-color-saturation film has velvet smooth textures. Professional wildlife photographers quickly switched to this new emulsion for their primary film. The film is rated at ISO 50, but many photographers find that EI 40 provides better overall image quality.



Kodak Ektachrome 64

ISO 64 • RMS 12

Ektachrome 64 Professional (ID EPR) is a professional film that provides good exposure latitude, and fairly fine grain for its film speed. It has been a tried and true workhorse for the working photographer. It features good color reproduction and soft highlight contrast which makes it perfect for outdoor portraits and landscape photography. Its enhanced color saturation, pleasing skin tones and high sharpness allow you to capture textures and fine detail.



Fujichrome Provia 100F

ISO 100 • RMS 8

Provia 100F (RDP III) has become a new yardstick for judging all chrome films as it surpasses the quality of even the slower Velvia. It can be pushed up to two stops when necessary with good results and makes excellent enlargements. Provia features accurate color balance and can handle a wide variety of lighting conditions. Its fine resolving powers make it the perfect choice for macro and nature photography.



Fujichrome Sensia 100

ISO 100 • RMS 10



This consumer-oriented film includes

Fuji's Super-Fine (Sigma) Crystal Technology for finer grain and greater sharpness. Sensia 100 is ideal for nature, scenics, and subjects in full

sunlight. It is a great color slide film for snapshots since this emulsion allows for natural skin tones, accurate color reproduction and fine grain. This film's rich tonal gradation and its ability to resolve fine detail also make it a good choice for macro and close-up flash photography.



Kodak Ektachrome E100VS

ISO 100 • RMS 11

Ektachrome E100VS (vivid saturation) is a professional transparency film designed for photographers looking for the extra visual intensity of increased saturation. Photographers who want normal color saturation can choose E100S film, or the E100SW offers a slightly warmer color balance. Now you can pick and choose your ISO 100 emulsion based on your subject matter or saturation preference. This ISO 100 film also features Kodak's T-Grain technology, so it has the image sharpness that we have come to know and love. Kodak Elite Chrome Extra Color 100 is the lower-priced consumer

version of this film.

Go To [Page 4](#)





CURRENT ISSUE

From the Archives

Recent Additions

Accessories
Buyer's Guides
Digital Cameras
Digital Peripherals
Film
Film Cameras
Lenses
Monthly Contest
Photo Techniques
Point and Shoot
Travel Photography

Site Features

▶ Photo Links
▶ Vote
▶ Previous Votes
▶ Previous News
▶ Classifieds
▶ Photo Store

Past Issues

2003

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	June
July	Aug	Sept
Oct	Nov	Dec

2002

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	June
July	Aug	Sept
Oct	Nov	Dec

Photo Offers

▶ Digital Photo Printing
▶ Digital Photo Camera
▶ Digital Imaging
▶ Kodak DC4800
▶ Zoom Camera

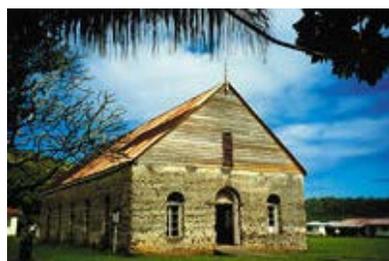
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Magazine

[Home/News](#) [Subscribe](#) [Give a Gift](#) [Subscriber Services](#) [Photo Store](#)

From the Archives



Agfa CTprecisa 200

ISO 200

RMS 12

CTprecisa takes its name from the word precise, which translates as accurate, correct and right. This film emulsion is designed to achieve high-quality slides that capture the total color range of the original scene. Resulting images feature

strong colors, soft shades and a tight grain pattern. We find people photos and scenics have uniformity of color from one scene to the next, even when the lighting changes, or flash fill is added.



Kodak Ektachrome E200

ISO 200 • RMS 12

This is Kodak's excellent medium-speed pro slide film. E200 offers the look of a lower-speed film with rich colors, very fine grain, great sharpness and lower contrast. It can be pushed to EI 400, 800 and even to 1000 with excellent results. Ektachrome E200 features excellent color rendition, natural skin tones and good detail in highlights and shadows. This is the perfect film to handle those low-light situations when you need to shoot chrome film.



Fujichrome Provia 400F

ISO 400 • RMS 13

This film features the finest grain in all 400-speed slide films. Provia 400F (RHP III) provides vivid and accurate color reproduction, excellent sharpness, pleasing skin tones and a rich tonal scale. This film is a much improved version of its excellent Provia 400

predecessor. It offers good push/pull processing capability to ISO 1600. This is an ideal film for stop-action photography, photojournalism and just about everything in between.

Photo by Mike Stensvold

B/W . . .

Kodak Technical Pan

ISO 25 • RMS 3

This film was our very first film review in

Article Index

Page 1

Page 2

Page 3

Page 4

[Digital Camera HQ: See prices and reviews of digital cameras.](#)





March 1982. Tech Pan is still the sharpest and finest-grain black-and-white film available. It is flexible in its processing and can be rated from EI 16-320. When processed in low-contrast developers like Technidol, it yields virtually grainless images. If processed in Kodak D-19, it magically produces extreme-contrast negatives. Minimal exposure latitude, so testing is necessary for achieving optimum results.



Fuji Neopan 100 Acros

ISO 100 • RMS 7

A new medium-speed, high-quality film, Neopan Acros features extremely fine grain, excellent tonal curve and superb image sharpness. The key to this new emulsion is the use of the Super Fine

(Sigma) Grain Technology, which maintains small, evenly spaced and similar-sized grain. This results in a quality film that is a fine choice for all types of picture taking, especially landscapes, portraits, photojournalism and fine art photography.



Ilford XP2 Super 400

ISO 400 • RMS varies with exposure & processing

This is a sharp, fine-grain black-and-white professional film that provides excellent print quality and the convenience of C-41 processing. Image quality is superb when the negatives are printed on conventional black-and-white

paper. XP2 Super yields superb black-and-white negatives that can also be processed and proofed by any convenient one-hour lab. You can also develop it yourself with Ilford's XP kit. This film has amazing exposure latitude (EI 50-800), improved contrast, excellent highlight and shadows, and more neutral base color than the original XP2.



Ilford Delta 400

ISO 400 • RMS varies with exposure & processing

The key ingredients in this new emulsion are its finer grain, increased film speed and exceptional sharpness. Ilford Delta 400 has expanded its processing to include a variety of chemicals, variable processing times

and it is balanced so you can process both 35mm and 120 simultaneously in the same chemical processing tank. To provide photographers a creative edge, Ilford designed the emulsion so it can be rated from EI 200 to 3200 by simply altering the combination of time and chemistry concentration.



Kodak Tri-X

ISO 400 • RMS varies with exposure & processing

Tri-X is an all-purpose panchromatic film for subjects requiring good depth of field, high shutter speeds, and extended flash distance range. It has long been a favorite of pictorial, sports, and new photographers for its beautiful tonal

range and high speed. Many users rate it at EI 250-320 and reduce

development to gain extended tonal range. Tri-X is easily pushed in several popular "speed-increasing" developers. This film has medium contrast, fine grain, wide exposure latitude, high sharpness, but can only handle a moderate degree of enlargement.



Kodak Professional Portra 400BW

ISO 400 • RMS 9

Chromogenic films are black-and-white film emulsions structured using 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 most interesting part of this emulsion is its five-stop exposure latitude, EI 50-1600, with no processing adjustments. Portra 400BW film sports T-Grain crystals and takes chromogenic film one step further as it is designed to be printed on color printing paper along with its color-negative counterparts.



Kodak T-Max T400 CN

EI 400 • RMS 10

Another chromogenic film, T-Max T400 CN is a mix of black-and-white film T-grain technologies and advanced dye-coupler techniques used in the newest Kodak color-negative films. The result is one of the most advanced high-quality black-and-white films ever produced. The key feature of this film is that at EI 400 this film has better quality than most ISO 100 black-and-white films. Instead of using the different layers to separate the colors normally found in color-negative film, Kodak created multiple layers of varying ISO film speeds. The original image is captured in a silver image and then is coupled to color dyes in the same emulsion.