



# A Kite's—Eye View

A camera on a string provides a unique low-altitude perspective

Photographs by Dan Weeks and Jim Powers

In the 1880s, two decades before Orville and Wilbur Wright successfully took their plane into the sky, some early photographers used a camera and a kite to obtain a unique bird's-eye view of the Earth. A camera would be suspended from the line of a kite, and its shutter was triggered by a burning fuse.

Eventually, the burning fuse was replaced by mechanical and electrical triggers, and more advanced kites and cameras were invented. Today, even lighter digital cameras and easier-to-use kites and rigs have made aerial photography a hobby for scores of enthusiasts around the world. With their feet firmly planted on the ground, these photographers are sending their cameras aloft to obtain a unique perspective of our planet from an in-between height rarely experienced by people.

"Kite aerial photography fills the gap between the top of a stepladder and the bottom of an airplane," explains Brooks Leffler, a kite aerial photography enthusiast from Pacific Grove, Calif., who makes and sells camera rigs for hobbyists.

## The Rise, Fall and Resurgence of This Art

Kites were first used to hoist cameras skyward in Europe in 1887. Photographs resulting from this technique were pub-

lished in *Nature* magazine in 1888, and seven years later the first kite aerial photographs were taken in the United States. The early decades of the 20th century were called the golden age of kite aerial photography, because kites became affordable and safer options than balloons and planes for snapping photographs from the sky. During this period, some remarkable photos were taken, including overhead shots of a devastated San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fire and an aerial survey of the Kilauea crater in Hawaii in 1915.

Appearing as though taken from a hot air balloon, these shots of Valley Forge National Park (left) and Chester Springs (right) were taken by Jim Powers with a digital camera suspended from a kite string. Many photographers are rediscovering a technique that's been around since before the Wright brothers flew their airplane at Kitty Hawk.

Kite aerial photography fills the gap between the top of a stepladder and the bottom of an airplane.

DANIEL WEEKS (4)



(left) A camera is held with a rubber-band-powered rotation system that is modeled after one that Dan Weeks had purchased. Silly Putty between the wooden dowel and the PVC pipe allows the camera to rotate slowly for different views of the surrounding countryside. (top) A level shot isn't always guaranteed, but a camera on a kite string can result in interesting photos like this one of Herr's Island in the Allegheny River. (right) In lighter winds, Dan uses a nine-foot wingspan delta kite. (below) In stronger winds, he uses a large Sutton Flow Form kite, shown here in action with his homemade rig suspended from the kite's line.



JIM POWERS



Eventually, improved airplanes replaced kites as the best way to obtain aerial photographs, and kite aerial photography nearly became a lost art in the 1940s and '50s. However, a renewed interest in this form of photography surfaced in the 1970s and '80s, and with the advancement of technology and the Internet came a resurgence of this technique as a hobby.

"Sending up a camera and taking pictures seems a simple enough method until you try it, when surprisingly involved mechanical difficulties present themselves," wrote Gilbert Trotten Woglom in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1897.

Just like their counterparts in the early days of the art, today's kite aerial photographers need the proper set of skills and tools to succeed. It starts with the right equipment—a camera, camera rig, kites, gloves, winders and anchors.

"The camera must be lightweight with a fast shutter speed," says Dan Weeks of Pittsburgh, "and you must be willing to risk sending it hundreds of feet into the air on a rig attached to the kite string."

An ideal rig is lightweight and easy to set up and use. The kite must be able to be flown in a variety of conditions and winds without collapsing or diving. Once the kite is released and maneuvered into place, the camera rig is attached to the kite line and sent into the air by letting out more string. To take photos, the shutter is

An bird's-eye-view of Beaver Stadium in College Park at Pennsylvania State University in Centre County.

triggered either automatically or remotely. Many photographers use a remote radio controller to tilt and rotate the camera and snap the shutter. A wide-angle lens captures the most interesting views, and a high shutter speed helps to reduce blur.

"The ability to get a kite up and then maneuvered into interesting places is key to interesting photographs," says Craig Wilson, a kite aerial photographer from Madison, Wis. "My goal is to get my camera to unusual places, high enough for an overview but not so high that the photos lose all detail."

The result is often breathtaking shots from a perspective associated more with birds than people. As Cris Benton, an enthusiast from Berkley, Calif., puts it, "It is a disarmingly simple notion to attach a camera to a kite and thus send it from the space we occupy to the space we cannot." ♥

—Photographer Jim Powers lives in Chester Springs. Dan Weeks, a kite aerial photographer from Pittsburgh, provided much of the information for this article. For more information, visit their Web sites at [www.flickr.com/photos/wind-watcher/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/wind-watcher/) and [www.flickr.com/photos/dweeks/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/dweeks/). For more photos from a variety of photographers see the site [www.flickr.com/groups/kiteaerialphotography/](http://www.flickr.com/groups/kiteaerialphotography/).