

THE 80~200/4 VARIO-ELMAR REVISITED.

Hunting Small Game...with a zoom lens.

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Leica's 80~200/f4 Vario-Elmar is probably the most under appreciated lens in the 'R' lineup.

This is the baby brother to the famed 70~180mm f2.8 APO Vario-Elmarit. Although a little bit slower, it is almost impossible to tell photos taken with the two lenses apart and the images it cuts are razor sharp.

Certainly, if you don't need the speed of the APO, the Vario-Elmar is both smaller and lighter, making it a perfect "walk around" lens.

Although built by Kyocera (*who also make many of the Ziess lenses*), in Japan, it is a 100% Leica design. The focus is silky smooth as is the zoom ring; and over all the build quality is indistinguishable from any lens

made in Wetzlar, Midland or Solms.

In 2005, Kyocera left the camera business and now specializes in elements for camera phones. Thus, the future of the lens is a wee bit hazy. However, they are still available from Leica, and they are also readily available, if somewhat expensive, on the used market.

Most of these fine zooms are ROM models, but in the first few months, a small run was made with 3-cams. As soon as the R8 was introduced, the switch to ROM was made. These 3-cam lenses are much sought after by both collectors (*for their rarity*) and by those who wish to use them with their SL and SL-2 bodies.

The lens uses 60mm filters, a size shared with a few Zeiss lenses (for Hasselblad) and little else. Thus, filters can be both expensive and hard to come by. The cure is a 60 to 62mm step-up ring which allows the use of the much more common, and far less expensive, 62mm filters. Better yet, with the filters in place, the built-in lens shade will still slide in and out, as if these larger filters were factory fitted!

If there is a drawback to this lens, it is the lack of a Macro setting, though close focus, at 1.1 meters is pretty good – especially if you use a 1.4 or 2x extender, which increases your reach without affecting the close focus limit.

Zoom lenses don't usually perform their best with extension



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tubes and the 80~200/4 is no exception. For basic macro work an ELPRO would be ideal. Sadly, Leica do not make Elpros in the 60mm size.

Enter Nikon's T5 and T6 close up lenses. Like the Elpros, these are high quality, dual element achromats and readily available with 62mm filter threads! Installed, via the 60 to 62mm step-up ring, they give an almost seamless close-up range to 1:2.

Colour rendition and contrast are second to none, while the lens is the closest thing to "flare-free" I've ever seen. Only 2 photos, in more than 15,000 show any noticeable flare.

If the lens has a flaw, it is when its used with digital cameras. Rarely, but when conditions are just right, light from bright surroundings around a darker subject, can cause light to reflect of the surface of a digital sensor, back to the lens. If the curvature of the rear element of that lens is just right, it can redirect some of that light back to the sensor, during exposure.

The result is a bright blue spot, in the center of the shot. This does not occur with film, because of its non-reflective, matte surface.



The Vario-Elmar is not the only lens with this problem. Other makers have found examples of it too. Still, this is a very rare phenomenon and although I can force the issue in controlled tests, in normal use it has happened in just 5 of more than 15,000 photos taken with the lens.

When it comes to performance, *"The proof"*, as they say, *"is in the pudding."*

Last June, I noticed a small group of Rufous Hummingbirds feeding

at some Red-Hot Poker plants. I took my trusty 80~200 mounted on my LeiCanon 30D, a monopod a small stool and headed outdoors. There I sat, motionless, about 12 feet from the plants, for many hours. The result is the shot which leads this article.

These little guys are fast, and using manual focus can be a challenge! But, it can be done. The photo at the top left is a crop from the main photo, showing the detail in the segmented ring around the eye of the Hummer.

I have a 12x18" framed print of this shot on my wall and it stands up well, to very close scrutiny. Suffice it to say that I have sold dozens of this photo.

I also own a similar sized print of a Snakebird, made with the 80~200 Vario-Elmar and 2x converter. It can be seen in Vol 39, #2, p.20.

So, if you have deep pockets, and a thirst for both speed and the knowledge that you have the very, very best, then the 70~180 APO Vario-Elmarit is for you. But, if you find the price prohibitive, the weight too heavy or the speed not truly necessary, then consider the 80~200 f4 Vario-Elmar.

It delivers, in an easy to carry form, the smooth, silky operation that we expect from Leica, with optical performance that will match all but the very finest of prime lenses, from any maker!

For "value for money", it is a veritable bargain!