

# My Eye in the Sky

By Bruce Philpott

I try to find different angles for my photos. It gives the viewer a fresh perspective of the scene and can even draw attention to things they haven't noticed from their ordinary eye level view. This often puts me down in the dirt or up on a balcony, but sometimes I can just put my camera a bit higher in the air.

In crowded situations, all I can see from eye level are the people directly in front of me. If I'm trying to show what the crowded art gallery reception was like, or the peace march downtown, the backs of people's heads don't convey the spirit of the event, so I raise my camera above my head.

Many scenic spots aren't quite high enough to really take in the view, so some additional camera elevation can improve these photos, too.

In film days, I had to settle for just holding the camera up at arm's length and hoping I wasn't shooting only the sky or the tops of people's heads. A camera with a waist-level viewfinder was good for giving a periscope view, but those cameras were more cumbersome than my 35mm camera.

A digital camera with a swivel LCD viewfinder gives you a good view of what the camera is "seeing," plus a pretty sore neck if you look up



Eye level view



An iPod Touch used as a remote viewfinder.



*Instead of a photo of only the first tier of people (above left), raising the camera gives a picture of the overall scene (below).*



View from above

at it for too long. I like to get my camera even further in the air than my arms can reach, so I've come up with a couple of methods. You've probably tried some of these yourself, but I hope I'll be able to give you some new ideas, too.

If you have a lightweight tripod, you can extend its legs and center column to the desired height and bring the legs together (some tripods even have a strap to hold the legs together). With the camera on top of the tripod, you can set your camera's self-timer and raise the tripod into the air. Even if it's too noisy to hear the shutter click, you can usually feel its vibration through the tripod. When you bring the tripod back to the ground, you can check to see if the camera was pointing in the direction you'd hoped, and make any needed corrections before hoisting it up in the air again.

Of course a monopod is ideal for this aerial photography because you don't have the bulk of the other two legs. I have a water bottle container which straps to my belt or camera bag's belt and I can use it as a "flag pole holder." Usually I just rest the base of the monopod on my thigh for stability, though.

A long cable release was handy for triggering the camera in film days, and we now have wired remote releases which enable us to trigger a digital camera that's not very far overhead. I took one of those wired remotes and soldered several additional feet of wire into the middle of the cable and that allowed me to trigger my camera at greater heights.

After working with my extended remote release for a while, I found an inexpensive, reliable radio remote control,

Canon: <http://tinyurl.com/ykzu4af>

Nikon: <http://tinyurl.com/ygcxsw9>

and I've never had to use the long wire since (although I keep it for a backup).

When I want to take photos higher than my monopod will reach, I use a Wooster Sherlock 6'-12' painter's pole (R056). The bottom part of this telescoping pole is fiberglass and the top section is aluminum,



*Photographing in a vineyard can be a bit like taking pictures in a narrow canyon with eight foot walls of vines.*



*Remote photography from a pole gives additional perspectives, and adds a sense of "place" to the pictorial story.*

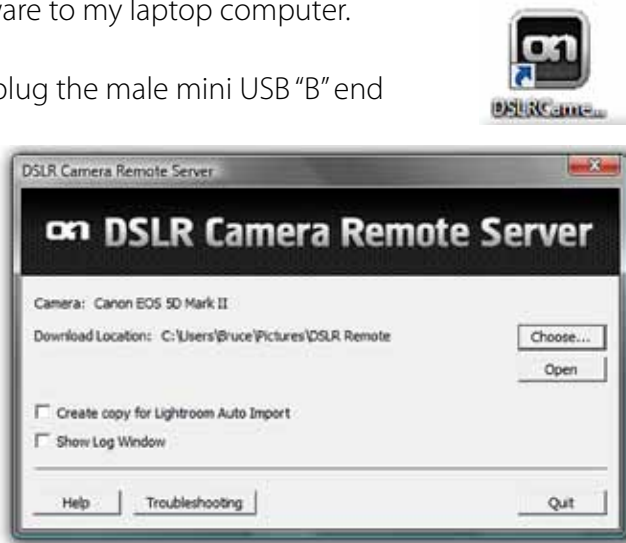
so it's sturdy but quite lightweight. I had to drill and tap to install a 3/8"-16 threaded stud in the top of the pole to be able to mount a ball head which would accept my camera. This adjustable pole has secure locking pins at every foot.

When I was in the vineyards during harvest, I would raise the camera on the pole, squeeze off several shots and bring the pole back down and look at the results on the camera's LCD. Not only was this trial and error system inefficient and tiresome, I couldn't frame a shot and wait for the "decisive moment," so I've been searching for a remote viewfinder for several years.

In 2009 OnOne Software came out with a \$20 application for the iPhone called DSLR Camera Remote which purported to be a remote camera viewfinder. I was very skeptical. I'd read bad reviews of the ZigView and similar products and feared DSLR Remote wouldn't live up to my hopes and expectations.

I don't have an iPhone, and I'm happy with my current cell phone, but it turned out that this application also works on the (non-phone) iPod Touch. I bought a refurbished model and downloaded the DSLR Remote application. I also had to download OnOne's free DSLR server software to my laptop computer.

Here's how it works: I plug the male mini USB "B" end into my camera and the male USB "A" end into my laptop computer and I turn on both the camera and the laptop. When I start the DSLR server on the laptop,



it recognizes my camera and a dialog box on the computer identifies the camera (below, left).

I tested this out at home where I have wireless internet. I turned on my iPod Touch and started the DSLR Remote application and it "saw" my laptop (I touched "Bruce's Toshiba") and the application started. When I pressed the Fire button, I heard my shutter click and almost instantly I could see the resulting picture on my iPod which wasn't wired to anything! VERY COOL!

There were still some issues I needed to overcome if I was going to be able to use this rig in the vineyards or taking aerial photos of a parade, etc. I couldn't very well carry an open laptop in one hand and my camera pole in the other. How would I press the Fire button?

On my computer, I went to its Power Options and found check boxes which gave me options of how my computer would respond in various situations. If it was idle for 10 minutes, did I want it to sleep, shut down, etc. One of these options was what it should do if the lid was closed. I checked the box that said that it should just keep running and not sleep. Now I can run this remote camera from a closed laptop.

Laptops have overheating issues, so I needed a way of carrying my closed laptop which wouldn't obstruct the airflow. I guess the sturdy mesh bag I bought has been discontinued, but the same company is carrying one which is very similar: <http://tinyurl.com/y8bhwol>

I also needed some way of suspending the iPod within my view. There are armbands available for iPods, but I wouldn't be able to adjust the

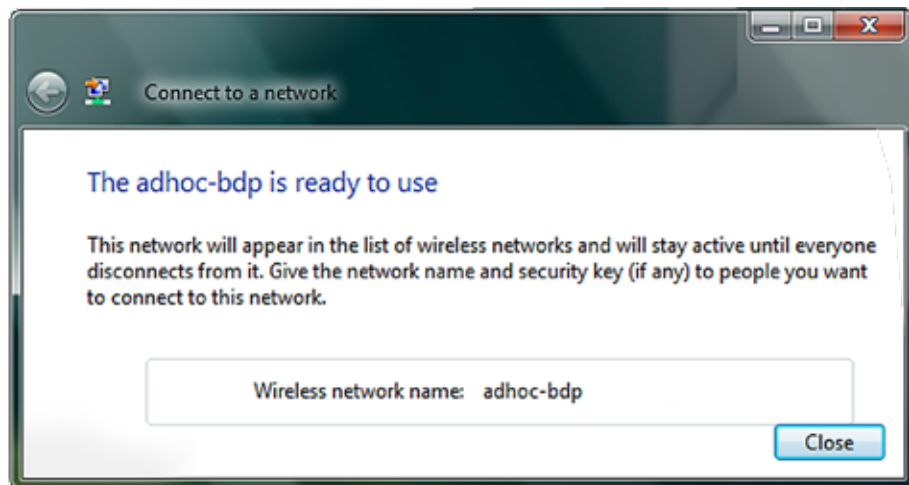


angle of the iPod if it were strapped to the pole or my arm. An internet search brought me to the perfect product for my purposes, the In Your Face flexible holder for iPhone and iPod Touch:

<http://tinyurl.com/ydfchss>

I put the iPod in the holder, attached the holder to the pole, snapped a shoulder strap onto the handles of the mesh bag and I was ready to take photos anywhere! Or so I thought. When I put my closed laptop in the mesh bag and put it on my shoulder with all software running, everything worked perfectly. I walked a few feet out my front door and somehow lost the wireless connection between the iPod and the laptop. Every time I went out of the house the connection stopped.

I contacted OnOne's customer service department and they said I'd have to create an ad hoc network on my laptop. I'd never heard of an ad hoc network, and I'm not at all familiar with networks or setting them up. On my laptop, I right-clicked the network icon and saw the available networks (including my wi-fi and the neighbor's) and looked around that dialog box, and saw an option to Create an Ad Hoc Network. I followed the steps and in a few moments I'd done it. The computer said it was ready for anyone to join it (who had the password I'd created).



I went to my iPod's Wi-Fi Options and saw my new network, and touched it. It asked for my password, and I was in! Then I set up the OnOne DSLR server and the iPod application, and I walked out my door and down the street, taking pictures. WOW!

My camera is one of the cameras on OnOne's list of supported cameras. It happens to have Live View (which I had never used), so among the many options on the iPod's DSLR Remote, I can turn Live View on and see right through the lens of the camera which is twelve feet in the air!

I can change from Aperture Priority to Shutter Priority, change f-stop or shutter speed, even ISO right from the iPod. I can even change my white balance, etc. The only two things I can't do are change the focal length of the lens or change the camera orientation (from landscape to portrait) while the camera's out of reach. Oh, and when I do have the camera in portrait orientation, the image appears sideways in the remote viewfinder because it accommodates your change in iPod angle by turning the image sideways regardless of camera orientation. This is a very minor inconvenience.

Another minor inconvenience is that my iPod battery only lasts about an hour when it's used as a remote



*This Panorama of Rutherford Hill Winery was made from several exposures taken from the top of a twelve foot painter's pole. The pole permitted me to capture the depth of the scene far better than an eye level view.*



viewfinder. I solved this by ordering a couple of inexpensive external rechargeable batteries for it. <http://tinyurl.com/ybn6r59>

These batteries have LCDs on them which show you how much power is left. It's easy to pull one out of the iPod (leaving it running on its own power) and insert another external battery. Even if your camera doesn't have Live View, you can see where the camera's pointed by simply taking a test shot. I use a combination of these techniques since the auto focus seems to be more accurate when I'm not using live view. I can switch back and forth using the controls on the iPod.

Naturally, I don't take every photo with my camera on the top of a pole. Some situations require a lot of aerial photos, but most of the time I want hand held images with a few high angle shots for variety. I can leave the computer running in the mesh bag and keep the iPod running (attached to its clamp) in the bag, too, and put my monopod through a loop in my belt. This leaves my hands free for normal shooting. When I want a high shot, I just pull out the monopod, clamp the iPod to it and snap my camera onto the monopod (I use quick releases on all monopods and tripods) and I'm ready to enjoy that



*Doug Fletcher, Vice President of Wineries, Terlato Wine Group.*

*Only a twelve foot pole could give me the correct vantage point for this photo of Mr. Fletcher with the year's first grapes being dumped into the hopper.*



*Eye level photo of the Angels' Peak Vineyard above the Napa Valley.*



*Giving the camera a ten foot lift emphasizes where the vineyard is in relation to the valley floor.*

higher view. Changing points of view from eye level to several feet up is a quick transition. You could try using a second camera body in this mixed shooting situation, but I think it would be too much equipment to juggle.

When the camera is at my eye, I can “steer” from one focus point in my viewfinder to another. I might want to focus on the center spot or one of the focus points surrounding it. When my camera is in the air, whether I’m using DSLR Camera Remote or not, Live View or not, I don’t have this option. It still enables me to get much more interesting photos than I’d get by simply holding my camera over my head.

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OnOne DSLR Camera Remote web page  
including System Requirements and Supported Cameras:  
<http://tinyurl.com/mlemne>

*Bruce Philpott is the Graphic Designer and Photographer for four wineries which are the Terlato Wine Group: Rutherford Hill Winery and Chimney Rock Winery in the Napa Valley, Alderbrook Winery in Sonoma County and Sanford Winery near Santa Barbara, California. His other photography and Photoshop tutorials may be found at [brucephilpott.com/photos](http://brucephilpott.com/photos).*

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