

3 Channel Helicopters As Gifts, Gags, and Introductions to RC Helicopters

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As most helicopter aficionados are typically flying six channel helicopters, let us not forget this Holiday season that three channel helicopters like this AH-64 Mini Helicopter are great stocking stuffers, gag gifts for the pure heli-geek, or a simple way to introduce someone to RC helicopters.

It's a helicopter of just this type that pulled me into RC helicopters and airplanes. These cheap helicopters generally cost between twenty and thirty dollars, so you're not going to break the bank by getting a friend, relative, or your child one of these little guys. With an average recommended age of 8 years on up, your child will have something of their own to fly. Your T-Rex 250 can wipe it's brow and relax a bit, without having to worry that small green army men are going to be taped to it for transport.

Three channel helicopters don't have the movement capabilities that higher channel helicopters have, but for our fun little gift, that's okay. Notice this helicopter is a coaxial heli, meaning instead of a tail rotor blade used for rotation, two main rotor blades, top and bottom, are used instead. By spinning one blade at a different speed, the helicopter achieves yaw, which means the nose will turn left or right. Yaw is controlled by the right stick moving left or right. That's one 'channel'. The other is for pitch, controlled

by moving the right stick up and down. This causes the tiny little blade on the helicopter's tail to spin, raising/lowering the tail which in turn lowers/raises the nose. This gives us forward/backward flight. The final channel is of course, the most important... Throttle. The left stick only has up and down movements on our example, it is used only for throttle, controlling how fast the blades spin, giving us our necessary lift.

Unpacking your three channel helicopter typically yields poorly written English instructions, the helicopter, the transmitter, and perhaps an extra tail or main rotor blade. Ours came with an extra tail blade in case we crash it too much...which...oh yes, we will. Although these guys are cheap and fun, they are, in some ways, harder to control than larger more advanced helicopters because of how light they are, let alone the cheaper components used to build them. Regardless, you'll still be flying and scaring the living daylights out of your cat or dog.

Safety note – although small, these things can still hurt ... it's like when I was very little, hunting with my father for pheasant. Well, he hunted, I walked and tried not to fall down. He had a shotgun, I had a BB-Gun (yes, I was that little). I asked with great enthusiasm if I could actually take one down if I hit it just right. Of course, an eye shot with a bee-bee could do it, I supposed. So yes, even with my training 'gun', I could still do some damage if the conditions were JUST RIGHT.

So, blah blah blah, let's go fly the darn thing, right? Well, not so fast there, Huckleberry. We need to charge up our batteries first. These little infrared controllers (meaning you must keep line of sight from your heli to your controller when flying) often use the batteries inside them to charge the helicopter itself. So, opening up the back of our transmitter and placing 6 AA batteries inside, we then can use the charger cable inside a small compartment on the transmitter to charge our helicopter. Turn the transmitter on, make sure the helicopter is off and plug in the charge cable. Typically 15 minutes or so for the basic charge... your transmitter will often indicate by turning a light on or off when your helicopter's battery is fully charged.

You'll notice that IR based helicopters need to have a channel associated with them, and ours is registered on channel A, so we must make sure our transmitter is set to the same channel. If someone else is flying one nearby on the same channel as you, it's just like 72 MHz radio systems... Disastrous results!

Now, we're charged, and yet... almost ready to fly. Turning on both helicopter and transmitter, you can give the throttle stick a little push and you'll notice the blades spin up. Just like any RC transmitter, you'll have to practice and get used to the feel of the throttle and right cyclic. It will come in time, and soon you'll be able to just hover the helicopter instead of having it perform an impression of a radio controlled yo-yo.

You can see by the video there's a little issue here with the initial hovering. The helicopter is spinning on it's own. This is due to the speed of one blade running faster than another, which will change as your battery wears down, so it's something that may need occasional fine tuning. Therefore, transmitters often have a trim dial. With very fine tune movements, rotate the dial opposite the direction your helicopter is spinning, and soon enough you'll be 'trimmed out'.

Now it's time to have some fun. Keep a few things in mind while you're banging into walls or terrorizing your pets:

1. Use a wide open space. A kitchen floor, living room area, etc. is generally sufficient. If you fly too close to an object, the prop wash (air movement from your blades) will be affected, and it's flight characteristics will temporarily change until you get it up off the ground, at least a foot or so from any objects.
2. Slow stick movements. These are especially twitchy, learn to get a feel for the movements so your hovers and turns are steady.
3. Air conditioners and/or Fans – Even small air currents will have an effect on a helicopter this small, keep that in mind.
4. Practice, but really... Have Fun. This isn't going to teach you helicopter basics beyond learning to get a feel for the sticks. A single rotor helicopter is a completely different beast. But, it's still a step farther, so enjoy it, get bit by the bug, and fly!

Looking to buy your own? Hit your Local Hobby Store, like HobbyTown USA, or order online, from places like Amazon, X-Heli.com, AirHogs and more. Just perform a search for 'three channel rc helicopter' and you'll see the myriad of results.

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