

Products **FOR** **BIRDERS**



Vortex Razor HD 13-39x56 Spotting Scope & Mountain Pass Tripod

Traveling with your optics is the cumbersome part of being a scope owner, whether you're toting it on a hike, across the county, or across the country—but who wants to miss out on the fine details of birds you've put the extra effort into seeing? Enter the Vortex Razor HD 13-39X56 spotting scope. Weighing in at a mere 28.6 ounces (less than 2 pounds)—and paired with Vortex's 3.1-pound Mountain Pass tripod kit for under 5 pounds total—this system is a feather-light game changer, wherever you're headed.

I regularly travel on a plane with a scope and have a dedicated optics carry-on. On a recent trip, I was excited to find the compact Razor HD (10.1 inches with angled lens) and tripod (19 inches folded up) fit neatly inside, with plenty of space left for my binocular, a few copies of my favorite bird-watching magazine (ahem), my travel coffee mug, and some trail snacks. The essentials!

My inaugural run with the scope was in the desert at a burrowing owl colony—not too shabby for a testing site! After my friends and I appropriately squealed at all the cuteness through binoculars, I ran to the trunk to pull out the scope for a closer look at their wide-eyed, inquisitive faces.

I hadn't set up the scope and tripod together before this moment, having been short on time to play around with it before my trip. I am intimidated by figuring out how gadgets and such work—I'm more of a visual learner who likes others to show me first—so I had a moment of stress as I looked at the foot of the scope and the tripod head. But I need not have worried, as mounting the scope body and securing it to the tripod could not have been more intuitive and user-friendly, and I had it all put together in a couple of minutes.

And how did it perform? Well, as we peered through the scope, with more *squee*-ing at the owls' big yellow eyes, long skinny legs, and fine white and brown mottling, my friend exclaimed, "It's magical!" As we smoothly panned from burrow to burrow, fluidly fine-tuning our focus and magnification, we were sold on the brightness and edge-to-edge clarity of this small but mighty tool that brought us face to face with our most sought-after bird of the trip.

Of course, birding on a sunny Arizona morning is a different experience from birding in less-than-ideal lighting conditions or in more shadowy habitat. So,

when I got home to the Midwest, I headed out one evening to a local dam to see who was hanging out at the spillway.

At first glance, only the usual suspects were present: some mallards, a double-crested cormorant, and a great blue heron. Then a small something zipped through my bins, and I followed it to the base of the dam, where it landed. I could discern in flight that it was a sandpiper, but I could not get a good read on it as it scurried along the foamy water's edge. Solitary or spotted? I watched for the telltale vigorous tail bobbing of the spotted, but the bird blended too well into the cement backdrop to detect the slight movement from such a distance.

I set up the Razor HD (in mere seconds this time) and panned the water's edge until I re-found this well-camouflaged and fast-moving little shorebird, and there it was—a rhythmically teetering tail. Though the light was fading and the bird was in the shadow of the dam, its white belly and eyeline (nonbreeding plumage of spotted sandpiper) were crisp and bright in the scope.

I ended up spending more time than I usually would observing a fairly common shorebird simply because I was enjoying using the scope and how easy it was to follow the bird as it erratically raced along the dam, pausing here and there to peck at some invisible prey.

When I finally packed it up, I overzealously hoisted the scope on my shoulder, forgetting how light it was. It occurred to me how much more inclined I would be to take this scope on a hike, knowing I wasn't likely to tire of carrying it—or better yet, I realized both it and the tripod would easily fit in my backpack for hands-free toting. Hmm, that's very appealing for someone who enjoys her day hikes....

Yes, some magnification is sacrificed (the Razor magnifies from 13-39) along with the extra weight, but if you're likely to use a scope more often because of its portability, I think that's a worthwhile trade-off. Especially at a lower price that doesn't compromise resolution and clarity from a trusted brand known for its superior quality and customer service. —Jessica Vaughan

For more information about the Vortex Razor HD 13-39x56 Spotting Scope, visit vortexoptics.com/vortex-razor-hd-13-39x56-spotting-scope.html.



Hawke Frontier ED X 8x42 Binoculars

In my slow journey of acquiring better and better binoculars over the years, I think I've discovered the sweet spot in terms of price—an amount that delivers great quality without hitting a dollar number that would buy a small car. I believe the experts call the category “midrange,” though I feel like that term undersells the quality on offer with these optics.

When I bought my current pair of very good but reasonably priced 8x42s a few years ago, I felt the investment had been worth it and that I'd found my forever binocular. But would I say no to the chance to check out another pair in the category? Definitely not. (Don't tell the other ones.)

The pair in question is the Hawke Frontier ED X 8x42 binoculars in a dapper dark green. Well-established in the UK, the British brand is growing in the United States. Expect to see more of these around.

Hawke knows how to make a good first impression, and they've taken a cue from Apple in their classy white packaging. Anyone who enjoys a good unboxing will love it.

The “what you get in the box” list exceeds many of their competitors. Most striking is a hard case for the bins with its own strap and a zippered clamshell design that hinges open just the right amount.

A sturdy flap folds over the top and clicks with a satisfying magnetic thump. I rarely use cases, but I could see using this one. (To be honest, I've never seen a case quite like this one.) As if they've read my mind, the box also includes a “protective pouch,” a nice, fitted cloth bag with a drawstring, for those of us who tend to just chuck our bins in our backpack or back seat for quick access.

First impressions of these Hawke binoculars are fantastic. I know the look of optics is not our top priority, but these are some handsome bins. The design avoids anything that looks like plastic or rubber and uses tasteful, sophisticated materials. The binoculars belong on the dashboard of a vintage Range Rover.

Eager to test these out, I went to my local park—sorry, in Britain it's a “patch”—to find some birds. It was late summer, and there were almost more lawn mowers than birds, but before long, I got some glass on a few subjects.

The sun was low and giving everything a golden light, so when an orange bird flew in, I wasn't immediately sure what it was. The Frontier ED X answered the question with the help of its “extra-low dispersion” glass (hence, “ED”), which renders the colors perfectly. What could've been an American robin was in fact a Baltimore oriole, and its bright orange was glorious. The glass in these bins also boasts dielectric coatings and phase-corrected glass for great light collection and color quality. I know those are the words from the box, but I'm just saying the technology works.

While late summer might be slow, bird-wise, it's still fun to see fledglings, and these binoculars did a good job helping me to identify them. The various brown and fuzzy babies were confusing, but clear images helped me distinguish the young sparrows and buntings from one another. Quality really does matter, and I regret how many years it took me to step up to this range of binoculars.

The binoculars and I were next challenged when looking for shorebirds across a mudflat. In this situation, you want the clearest image from edge to edge in your field of view, and the ED glass helped ensure good clarity with minimal blurring at the edges. I got lucky and found a spotted sandpiper busily making its way across the mud. As it moved from sun to shade, it was interesting to note how the binoculars' capture of light and color still stayed strong. As you probably know, lesser bins really fall short in this situation.

Speaking of field of view, the Frontier 8x42s have loads. I always demand a huge field of view from my binoculars, since I'm afraid of missing something out there. These boast 426 feet at 1,000 yards, which is great for the category.

All in all, the performance of these Hawke binoculars was strong. As always, it's smart to test out binoculars for yourself, if possible, at a store or festival to make sure they're a good fit. But, without a doubt, these binoculars delivered great optical quality and

looked good doing it. They would also be a super classy gift.

Last but not least, Hawke offers a “no-fault lifetime warranty,” which has to be one of the best phrases in the English language. Perhaps these handsome bins could be your forever binoculars. —Karl Mechem

For more information about the Hawke Frontier ED X 8x42 Binocular, visit us.hawkeoptics.com/frontier-binoculars.html.

Zeiss SFL 12x50 Binocular

Having used the Zeiss 8x32 Terra ED with satisfaction for several years now, I was at first taken a bit aback by the thought of trying their SFL 12x50. I travel for work quite a bit and was quite happy with my more compact-sized Terra—easy to stash in my carry-on and convenient and easy to wear around as I took a few hours to explore in my free time. But the wider field-of-view and, obviously, the increased magnification were quite alluring, so I gave them a go.

At first grab, I was surprised by how much lighter they felt than I expected. They are heftier than my Terra, of course, but not nearly what I anticipated. Zeiss manages this with thinner lens elements and a magnesium housing. The balance is excellent, which means that it was easy for me to sling them up with either hand as needed if I spotted something on the go. I also appreciated the smooth grip of the housing, and the focus wheel was slick, fairly fast, and easily accessed both one- and two-handed, thanks to the minimized distance between lens elements.

What I really enjoyed was the increased light and field of vision. Both of these features were significant when compared to my Terra, and for me, it was the dealbreaker between the two—on work trips, I am all on my own for identification—I need every detail I can get my eyeballs on. There was no doubt about the advantage that these 12x50s gave me, with much less loss of convenience due to weight and size than one would think.

One small detail that I also appreciate is that the objective lens covers are easy to remove but still feel really heavy-duty. Since I travel with my binoculars, making sure the lenses are well-protected is a critical concern, and I felt no qualms about popping these



in my backpack with my other travel necessities. The carrying case is well-made, and I have always been a fan of the Zeiss neck straps. I tend to wear mine cross-body, but the little extra cushioning makes them fairly comfortable around the neck as well, even with the added weight.

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised and enjoyed this new offering from Zeiss, especially its wide field of view and brightness, and how relatively light they are. If you have been curious about what a stronger birding binocular is like to use in the field, I think you will be pleasantly surprised, too. —Caroline Brindo

For more information about the Zeiss SFL 12x50 Binocular, visit zeiss.com/consumer-products/us/nature-observation/binoculars/sfl/sfl-12x50.html.



Kowa TSN-88A Prominar Scope

The updated TSN-88A is the same size as its older counterpart, the TSN-883—but I wouldn't have believed it without a side-by-side comparison. My hunch tells me it's the redesigned housing; with recent scopes, Kowa smartly retained the signature green alloy and introduced a handsome black leather accent complete with logo badge flaunting its proprietary PROMINAR optical technology near the eyepiece. This modification gives the overall body a slicker, more modern aesthetic quality. Also, the 88 feels just a bit lighter in my hand.

So, is the TSN-88A lighter?

Lo and behold, the TSN-88A with eyepiece weighs in a skosh over 4 pounds. This is nearly 3.5 ounces lighter than my TSN-883 with the same TE-11WZ eyepiece. This is a considerable difference. When you're birding all day in the field, hauling a scope mounted on a tripod—and likely binoculars and a daypack—even a slight reduction in weight matters.

Fortunately for me, favorable northwest winds in Cape May this week mean I'll get to spot migratory bird species in addition to testing the 88A. My initial trials are localized: a wooded area around dusk in low-light conditions facing west. Although birds are scarce, I enjoy phenomenal image quality in subpar conditions, and no eye strain whatsoever.

Next up: Late-afternoon, sunshine and a pair of hummingbird feeders in my yard. I position the scope equidistant between one feeder on the west, the other to the east. Then I wait. As the hummers alternately visit each feeder, the smooth dual knob

focus (one for fast focus, the other for fine-tuning) allows me to easily and (more importantly) swiftly focus on the details of the juvenile female ruby-throat as I view her taking sips from the feeder on the east side. Though the west-side feeder is in the shadows, the hummer's colors are decidedly vibrant. With the 88A, as with the 883, there is minimal slack in focusing on the subject as I enjoy outstanding image clarity.

My final test finds me stationed as the sun sets over Delaware Bay in gorgeous weather during an exceptionally low tide. Many laughing gulls are beginning their southbound flight, but I notice one on a distant mudflat. To inspect it closely, I dial the TE-11WZ zoom eyepiece to 60x magnification. It's a breeze, and the nonbreeding gull's distinctive-but-now-fading red bill is easily discernible.

I pan along closer mudflats and enjoy the herky-jerky foraging actions of a few semipalmated plovers. The scope, once again, performs well. I have zero complaints and notice no chromatic aberration.

In the above outings, I enjoyed outstanding clarity and color in my subjects. I intentionally did not check this model's specification sheet prior to testing, and I was not surprised when I later read that Kowa had improved the optical coatings for this model. The upgraded lens coating allowed me to view my subjects with spectacular color resolution in every tested condition.

For the birder who wants an all-purpose, lightweight scope, the TSN-88A delivers and then some. However, I cannot emphasize enough my recommendation that you personally test optics yourself prior to purchase. With an investment like a spotting scope, this is especially true—not to mention that everyone's eyesight differs; what works for my 49-year-old eyes may differ for a 26-year-old's or a 64-year-old's. Take your time. Ask questions. Kowa's knowledgeable representatives have likely heard it all and understand what birders are looking for in a scope. —Kelly Ball

For more information about the Kowa TSN-88 Prominar Scope, visit kowaoptic.com/Optics-Accessories/Spotting-scopes/TSN-88/.

Celestron Nature DX and Nature DX ED 8x42 Binoculars

When it comes to binoculars, Celestron has long been a trusted name in optics. Their Nature DX and Nature DX ED 8x42 models are designed for outdoor enthusiasts, offering a balance of performance, affordability, and durability. My first thought when I unboxed them and gave them a quick test in my backyard was that they would be excellent binoculars for the newer birder looking to get more serious about their hobby without breaking the bank.

In particular, I thought of the bird watchers in my neighborhood who post regularly on our social media page with their latest sightings and excitement over what they are seeing in their yard. So I reached out to one of them, Nikki, who has been birding for a few years now but has been looking to upgrade her binoculars. She was getting excited about fall migration, having seen her first fall warbler earlier in the week. When I dropped off the Nature DX at her house, which has an awesome back porch at canopy level and overlooking a ravine, I knew she was going to have fun trying out these bins.

Sure enough, she soon reported, "I just spotted a warbler and was able to grab the binoculars off the counter and focus very quickly and stay focused as the bird hopped around the leaves, like they do. Nashville warbler!"

Nikki also tested them beyond her backyard, toting them on a hike with her family. Besides being impressed with their clarity, brightness, and easy-to-use central focusing knob, she found the lightweight bins (1.5 pounds) hung comfortably around her neck during their two hours in the field. She noted, too, that the lens covers "were easy to take on and off to keep everything protected while out and about, but I didn't have to fumble with them when I wanted to use them."

While the standard Nature DX model offers excellent color reproduction and contrast, with a wide field of view that's ideal for birdwatching, the DX ED model takes it up a notch with the inclusion of ED (extra-low dispersion) glass. This gives the ED model an edge in color accuracy and sharpness, for clearer and more vibrant images, especially when viewing distant objects or in bright, contrasting environments.

When friends who were taking a big cross-country national parks trip asked if I recommended a binocular for enjoying everything from birds to mammals to scanning wide open vistas, I knew the Nature DX was just the thing for them. Whether watching wildlife in Yellowstone or studying the



detail of Mount Rushmore, they have an ideal optic at hand for making the most of this once-in-a-lifetime family trip.

Celestron's Nature DX and Nature DX ED 8x42 binoculars are an excellent choice for those looking for reliable, high-performance optics without the premium price tag. The Nature DX is a solid option for those looking for affordability and all-around performance, while the Nature DX ED provides a noticeable step up in optical quality. Whether you're exploring nature afield or simply observing the beauty of nature from your backyard, Celestron's Nature series will deliver an exceptional viewing experience. —JV

For more information about the Celestron Nature DX and Nature DX ED 8x42 Binoculars, visit celestron.com/collections/binoculars.

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