

# The Leica Ultravids

When I first met my wife, I immediately knew it was right. When I first picked up a pair of Ultravids, I knew it was right. (My wife is going to kill me for comparing her to a binocular, but YOU understand!) The new Ultravid line from Leica is simply fantastic. Leica has stepped up to the plate to greatly improve upon their Trinovid line by significantly reducing the weight, improving light-gathering, and redesigning the shape to be slimmer and smoother than the old “pickle barrels” of the previous line. Compared to other binoculars on the market, the Ultravids are on par with the top-of-the-line offerings, even surpassing them in many regards. Plus, the Ultravids cost a couple of hundred bucks less than the Swarovski ELs, for example.

Whether it is studying the contrast of the tail versus the rump of a Hermit Thrush in a deep, dark hemlock glen at dawn, or marveling at the stellar colors of a male Baltimore Oriole in full sunlight, the image produced by this glass is simply enjoyable. The sharpness, the clarity, the color from edge to edge are as good as it gets. Watching woodcocks display at dusk, long after most binoculars have been put down, is most rewarding. The glass, and the coating on that glass, are superb. The Ultravids incorporate their new “High Lux System” coatings with top-quality prisms to produce a fantastic image. This new prism coating produces a 6% increase in light transmission over the coatings used in the Trinovid BNs, according to Leica.

We can talk all day about fun things like light diffusion and BAK-4 fully multicoated prism technology, but when we are comparing the best binoculars from the best brands, the optics are all going to be great. What becomes increasingly important, then, is how they fit, how they feel. That’s what I call the

gestalt of the binocular—how it feels in *your* hands and how it fits on *your* face. It’s just like when we talk about the gestalt, or “jizz” (the corrupted acronym for “general impression of size and shape), of a bird. Analogously, I like to talk about the “jiffy” of a binocular. This is my cor-



The Ultravids are available in the classic leather coating (left), as well as in a rubber armor- ing (right). The rubber-armored Ultravid weighs a couple of ounces more, but the added durability and shock resistance make it the better choice for birders. © Derek Lovitch.

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The “jiffy” of a binocular is what we think and feel when we pick up a binocular and look through it. Can you get the barrels close enough together for your eyes (the inter-pupillary distance)? Are they too heavy? Are they well balanced? Do they fit your hand? Where do your fingers go, and is that comfortable? How does the image look for *your* eyes? All of these questions can be answered by only one person: You. No salesperson, no catalogue, no manufacturer can answer these. You have to pick up a pair and see how it feels. This is a very subjective sort of analysis. However, when you’re comparing apples to apples (for example, Swarovski ELs versus Leica Ultravids), it often simply becomes a matter of which you like better—Red Delicious or Granny Smith. (I prefer Gala, but that’s a different review.)

The click-stop eyecups are a great help in setting

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the perfect distance from your pupil, and the rubberized coating on the eyecup itself adds a touch of comfort as I jam them into my face—which I tend to do for maximum stability. Although I usually wear contacts, I spent a few days in the field with the Ultravids while wearing my eyeglasses. The eye relief was sufficient for me, and I did not have to deal with any vignetting. However, I find that two eyeglass wearers will look through the same binocular and sometimes have different results. I believe it is even more imperative for eyeglass wearers to “test drive” a binocular before making a final decision.

Many of the complaints some of us have had about recent optics offerings have been answered in the Ultravids. Very important to me is the quickness of the focus. It's tough to balance speed with precision in fine-tuning the focus wheel, but Leica has done that here. About 1.25 revolutions of the focus wheel take you from close focus to infinity, yet I never felt that I lost any precision. Furthermore, I was impressed with the depth of field, allowing me to adjust the focus as little as possible.

The binocular is light for its size (27.8 ounces for the rubber-coated 8 × 42, for example), thanks to a body made of magnesium, with a titanium hinge. These are two very strong, durable materials that avoid excessive bulk or weight.

The close focus of just over 10 feet for the 8 × 42 is adequate. Not great, but not bad at all. A closer focus would likely mean a slightly longer barrel (and therefore more weight and different balance), and possibly more turns of the focus wheel. While dedicated butterfly watchers would probably like a better close focus (see the 8 × 32 Ultravids), let's consider how often we really are within 10 feet of a bird. (The close focus for the 10×, by the way, is about six inches better.)

Since I am a steadfast 8× power guy, I spent the major-



My right thumb wanted to place itself directly on top of, not next to, the thumb rest. The feature was annoying until I got used to repositioning my thumbs. I'd rather see this ridge shaved off. © Derek Lovitch.

ity of my time playing with the 8 × 42s. However, if you are a 10× person, the 10 × 42 Ultravids are tough to beat. They weigh in at about half an ounce less than the 8 ×



The rain guard on the Ultravids fits too snugly, forcing me to look down or fumble with the cover during a sudden downpour. © Derek Lovitch.

42s. The 330-foot field of view is very good for a 10-power binocular, and about the same as for most similar offerings. The quality of the image is excellent, as it is for



At about 6 inches in length, and weighing in at only 27.8 ounces, the Ultravids are smaller and lighter than most other top-of-the-line full-size binoculars. They comfortably fit both my hand and face. © Derek Lovitch.

the whole Ultravid line.

The 7 × 42 is a great binocular, and it is tough to find fault with someone's decision to go with the 7s over the 8s. A bit more brightness, and a touch more field of view, but a little less power and an 11-foot close focus. An extra 1.1 millimeters of eye relief may help some eyeglass wearers as well. Since I had been using 8 × 42s before this trial, and since 8 × 42s seem to be more popular with birders and the customers in my store, I chose to spend my time with the 8 × 42s. But once again, this is simply a personal preference, and one that you should decide for yourself.



Recall from the first paragraph my first impression of this binocular—y'know, the one I'm still in hot water over! Well, after using it all day for a few days, I began to notice a problem with the design of the rubber-armored body. The ridges (the thumb rest) on the underside of the barrel began to annoy me. These bumps, like so many

other “comfort features” designed into optics, were in the wrong place for me. My right thumb always wanted to sit directly on top of the ridge. Other binoculars have depressions for your thumbs to fit in, but you could at least ignore those. However, the ridge began to annoy me. After a couple of weeks, I had become used to it, and my hands would naturally place themselves in the proper place. The new Ultravid ad proclaims, “The thumb rest is an ergonomic masterpiece.” Well, not for me. Personally, having known others who have complained about this type of feature, I would prefer to see Leica shave off this bump and shed the extra fraction of an ounce. The ergonomic design, light weight, and splendid balance of the Ultravids do not require the extra bell and/or whistle that this thumb-ridge-thing is supposed to provide. You could also avoid these ridges by going with the reintroduced leather coating.

Both the 8 × 42 and the 10 × 42 Ultravids are available with a leather outer shell. Same lightweight magnesium body, but instead of the rubber armor coating, the barrels of the binocular are covered with a thin leather skin. The overall weight is reduced by another 2.5 ounces, and they look quite sharp. However, I would question whether the leather is as durable and shock-resistant as the rubber, and whether it is slick in wet conditions. I would suggest birding with the rubber-armored version (both black and green colors), and keeping the fancy leather pair on the windowsill. In fact, Leica reintroduced the leather coating for style, rather than function, for birders.

My other complaint about the Ultravids is with the lens covers. The objective lens covers feel chintzy. In fact, after having only a handful of customers take a look at a pair of Ultravids out of our store's display case, the lens covers ripped (at the “hinge”, where the cap joins the loop). Granted, most birders forgo using objective lens covers, but if you're going to include them, they might as well be of the same high quality as the optics they are protecting.

The rain/dust/lunch guards (covering the ocular lenses) also leave something to be desired. The basic problem is that they fit too snugly. On a cold, wet day with thick

**Ultravid Specifications**

	<u>7×42</u>	<u>8×42</u>	<u>10×42</u>
Exit Pupil (mm)	6.0	5.3	4.2
Field of View (feet)	420	390	330
Eye Relief (mm)	17.0	15.9	15.8
Close Focus (feet)	11.0	10.2	9.7
Weight (ounces)	27.0	25.0 (leather) 27.8 (rubber)	24.7 (leather) 27.3 (rubber)

gloves on, I was unable to easily flip the rain-guard on and off, and crucial seconds were lost as the bird disappeared into the distance. Then there was the time that I was out sea-watching on a miserable day that featured repeated, but brief, sudden downpours. Every time the rain began to fall, I fumbled with the flimsy cover and had raindrops splashing on the lens. I had to take my eye off the passing birds to clean the lenses. I would much prefer a stiffer, more easy-to-use-while-wearing-bulky-gloves rain-guard, such as the ones that come with Leica's Trinovid line. An effective rain-guard should require nothing more than a flick of a thumb to flip it on and off.

But let's be honest here: We're finding faults only with picky things like lens covers and thumb-bumps. If these are the biggest problems with these binoculars, Leica has done pretty darn well!

### A Few Comments About the Other Offerings in the Ultravid Line

The Ultravid line from Leica is complete with models of other shapes and sizes. The ones of most relevance to most birders are the 8 × 50, 10 × 50, 12 × 50, 10 × 32, and 8 × 32.

The 8 × 50s and 10 × 50s are brighter than their 42-millimeter counterparts, but the tradeoff in size and weight is probably too much for most of us to want to deal with. If my hands and face were bigger, I would certainly consider these options more. Most of the time (except in extremely low light conditions), however, our eyes gather more than enough light from a 42-millimeter objective lens diameter.

Leica also offers a 12 × 50 model that would be great if I were six-feet-eight. Thirty-seven ounces is a bit more than I want around my neck.

Also, I can forget about holding a glass of that size steady for eight hours of hawkwatching or while on the rocking bow of a pelagic boat.

Then, there are the 8 and 10 × 32s. Lightweight, compact, and with a stellar close focus, this size is perfect for many of us. However, the reduced objective-lens diameter reduces the light-gathering ability, and therefore presents a proportionally smaller exit pupil; therefore, the low-light (dawn and dusk, etc.) capabilities are diminished. If you spend a lot of time butterflying, these are a must to look at and consider. A close focus of 6.9 feet for the 10s and 7.2 feet for the 8s is terrific. Hikers, travelers, or anyone else who doesn't want a lot of weight around the neck would greatly appreciate the measly 21 ounces for the 10s and the 19.7 ounces for the 8s. That's tough to beat. Personally, I don't want to trade the light-gathering abilities of the "full-sized" binocular, but since the "mid-sizes" are rapidly increasing in popularity, look for me to spend some more time with these in the future.

### Summary

To sum it up, Leica has once again raised the bar. While it might not be worth scrapping your new pair of Swarovski ELs, if you are in the market for a top-of-the-line binocular, I encourage you to strongly consider the Leica Ultravids. But don't take it from me—take a look for yourself. Test the "jiffy", and don't just compare an abstract assortment of technical specifications. These are great binoculars, and Leica will have a tough time getting this loaner pair back from me!

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