

Mid-price Binoculars

PART II

In the previous issue of *Birding* (May/June 2006, pp. 72–76), I began my review of mid-priced binoculars (\$275–500) by discussing image quality, field of view, and focusing abilities of seven models from six manufacturers. I will now discuss four more categories: eye relief; size, shape, and weight; bells and whistles; and other factors. I will then try to draw some conclusions about my own preferences. As I mentioned in the first half of this article, I am not necessarily recommending one binocular over any other. Rather, I am simply offering an objective look at various categories of comparison to allow you to draw your own conclusions as to which binocular is best for you.

Eye Relief

It's nice to see that each of these binoculars forgoes the old floppy rubber eyecups for rigid eyecups that either twist up or pull out. In fact, only the Leupold Pinnacles have pull-out eyecups, while the others all have twist-ups. (I tried many times to raise or lower the eyecups on the Alpens, and the whole eyecup would unscrew and fall off. The ball bearing or threading that allows the eyecup to twist up or down seemed to keep getting stuck. I hope that this is just an isolated problem with this one sample I

received.) Each of these binoculars, including the pull-out version eyecups of the Pinnacles (but you'll have to switch out the eyecups—included—for use with eyeglasses), allows the user to adjust the depth of the eyecup to provide the perfect eye relief. This is an important feature, especially for eyeglass wearers, and I am happy to see that we can now find this feature in the mid-price offerings.

I also find the eye relief of each binocular to

be more than sufficient for me when I wear eyeglasses, with minimal vignetting. Usually, 14 mm is enough eye relief for eyeglass wearers, and each of these models provides at least that much. The greatest eye relief is provided by the Pentax (22 mm), but even the least eye relief, in the Pinnacles, is a respectable 17.8 mm. And since we have the flexibility provided by the twist-up eyecups on each binocular, you can adjust the distance the binocular sits from your eyes or eyeglasses to find your comfortable eye relief. (None of my birdwalk participants had a problem with any of these while wearing eyeglasses, either).

Now, someone just needs to come up with a way to get that eyecup to actually *lock* in place when not fully extended! If you need an intermediate setting, you often have to adjust the eyecups continually, carefully making sure you set each to the same exact height, especially every time you take the rain guard off. Only a slight pressure will push the eyecups in and throw off your eye relief the next time you look through your binocular. There has to be a way to lock into an intermediate height, and one which you can easily remember if you need to readjust after sharing your binocular with someone else.

Shape, Size, and Weight

I was impressed by how lightweight most of these offerings are. The larger Pentax are an above-average 27.5 oz., and the smaller Legends are a downright rock-like 30.1 oz. Otherwise, though, the Monarchs weigh in at a mere 21.5 oz., with the Olympics at 21.8 oz. a very close (and indiscernible to me) second. Although the Apex and the Ultra-lites each weigh only 24.0 oz., the Ultra-lites have a slightly heavier “jiffy”, maybe just due to bulkier, wider barrels. But the

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Ultra-lites also feel a bit front-heavy to me, helping the slimmer and more evenly balanced Apex feel lighter overall, even though they are not. Meanwhile, the long barrels of the Pentax are definitely front-heavy, but even the more-compact Pinnacles also feel a bit unbalanced. That's a part of the jiffy I talk about, and this subtle effect will differ from person to person.

Although all of these binoculars are "full size" in the sense of power and objective-lens diameter, most of them are smaller and more compact than many of the higher-end binoculars. With the exception of the longer Pentax, all of these binoculars are between 5.0 and 5.5 inches long. Combined with the slimmer profile, especially of the Monarchs, Apex, and Pinnacles, these binoculars definitely fit smaller-handed and smaller-faced users—especially kids—better than most full-size binoculars at any price range.

Each of these models has a slightly different design and feel. Happily, none of them has attempted to put bumps, ridges, or other impediments in the way of my fingers. Most of them do, however, have some sort of recessed thumb impression, but I was easily able to ignore those that didn't line up with my fingers—none got in my way. The Ultra-lites are the most distinctively textured, with little soft raised rubber pimples on the barrel, purportedly to improve the grip. I do not find them to be of any additional help, although they are not a hindrance either. Other than that, I was least impressed by a somewhat chintzy feel to the rubber coatings of the Leupolds and Alpens, while the Bushnells are, well, rock-hard, and I find them somewhat uncomfortable in the hand due to the ridges on the barrel. The rubber coating on the Pentax and Monarchs is pleasantly unremarkable.

Bells and Whistles

While I wouldn't recommend basing your decision simply on the bells and whistles of a particular binocular

(it's what's inside that counts!), these added features are worth considering, especially when we are discussing overall value. For example, if the neck strap is uncomfortable and you need to spend \$20 or so on a better



Binoculars come in many shapes and sizes, which is good because so do birders. Each birder will have different requirements for his or her binocular, with size and weight, along with cost, being among the major factors. © Derek Lovitch.

strap, you've basically added \$20 to the price of the binocular. I find the neck strap included with the Swift Ultra-lites to be particularly uncomfortable (rough and scratchy), especially on a hot day, and the strap for the Pentax is not much better. Alpen gets the award for the best, and most useful, additional features. The Apex includes a very comfortable, wide neoprene strap, and the carrying case is particularly useful. The canvas case includes an extra pocket for checklists or cleaning supplies; or if you choose not to use the case in the field, it makes an excellent field guide satchel.

Although I am not happy with the material of the neckstrap for the Ultra-lites, I am *very* happy to see someone *finally* rethink how we attach the neck strap to the binocular. A handy clip that snaps onto the binocular eliminates the annoying fumbling and difficult adjustments called for with the traditional method of attaching the strap to the binocular. It's about time someone came up with a solution to this common complaint.

The Leupold Pinnacles include a glare-reducing eyeshield on the eyecups. Some people will like them. Others won't. But at least they include interchangeable eyecups for use with eyeglasses.

Useless ocular guards (rain guards) are a pet peeve of mine. Happily, each of these models includes perfectly adequate and functional rain guards. Only the Alpens include supposedly-functional-in-the-field objective covers. However, they are attached to the hinge of the binocular, and tend to flop around, sometimes getting in



The all-around quality of the image provided by the Nikon Monarchs—especially the depth of field, along with the slim design and environmental-friendliness of its production process—made this binocular the reviewer's preference among the seven models reviewed in his article. *Your preference may differ, however, based on a number of criteria.* © Derek Lovitch.

the way of my field of view. They were soon yanked off.

On another note, Swift has also given us the option of having our own brighter plumage. Instead of just the traditional gray-and-black binocular, the Ultra-lites are available in black and bright blue. If you want to stand out in the flock—or be able to coordinate your binocu-

lars with your outfits—you finally have an option.

Other Factors

Price. These binoculars are all in about the same general price range, so we have to decide which features are most important to us, and compare that with the cost. Is the Alpen Apex worth more than the Leupold Olympics, or is the Nikon Monarch worth more than the Pentax? That's a tough one, but I hope I have given you some data on which to base your decision. The price range given in Table 1 should provide the low and high extremes of what you should pay for these binoculars. Use extreme caution in purchasing optics priced below minimum advertised or minimum sales price. The reason: You may find yourself doing business with non-authorized dealers. That means you don't actually know what you're getting from a quality-control standpoint; plus, most companies will not honor the warranties of these so-called "gray-market" purchases.

There is one last factor worth mentioning. We often think of birding as a fairly environmentally benign activity. However, the processes that create our binoculars require some very harmful ingredients and byproducts. In this regard, I strongly commend Nikon for taking a proactive role in protecting the environment that we, and the birds we enjoy, depend on. Nikon has committed to having all of their products comply with the European Union's directive restricting the use of certain hazardous substances in electrical and electronic equipment (ROHS) compliant by 2006; see <www.rohsdirective.com> for more information. Recently introduced into the Monarchs is Nikon's "Eco-Glass" technology, which produces lenses free of lead and arsenic. Furthermore, the outer rubber shell is Vinyl Chloride free; see <www.atsdr.cdc.gov/tfacts20.html>.

I recently had a customer with extremely sensitive chemical allergies try out some new binoculars. Due to the rubber coatings, she had to wear a face mask when using a new binocular until the "new car smell" wore off. That "new car smell" is created in part by the release of vinyl chlorides from such surfaces as the rubber coating in binoculars and automobile dashboards. I was unaware of the absence of this chemical in the Monarchs, but when she tried one out, she was surprised to be able to use the binocular without her mask. We didn't know why, but now we do. Nikon has not only worked to protect the environment, but they also made at least one

continued on page 78

continued from page 76

person very happy. Good for them, and let's hope other manufacturers follow their lead. Changing the way we make binoculars may not change the world, but we have to start somewhere.

Summary

All of these binoculars are worth considering. Some shine brighter (pun unavoidable) than others, but any of these offerings are worthy pieces of glass that you would likely be happy with. The Leupold Pinnacles are the brightest of the bunch, but their depth of field is poor. The Leupold Olympics have a better depth of field than the Pinnacles, but are not as bright, and really don't excel in any particular category. Despite excellent brightness and close focus, the Bushnell Legends are heavier than I would prefer, the focus wheel is much too slow, and the image seems yellowish to my eyes. The Pentax have a great depth of field, but they are just too big and front-heavy for me, and the close focus needs improvement. I am not a fan of the focusing mechanism on the Ultra-lites (it is just too fast). Moreover, their depth of field is not great. Their brightness and sharpness (especially at the edges) is great, however, and the close focus is superb. The Alpens take a touch too long to focus, and I had an issue with the eyecups getting stuck, but they are very bright and sharp, and also have excellent close focus.

It is an extremely tough call, but in the end I think I will be adding the Monarchs to my want list as an emergency spare at home and while traveling. Nikon's commitment to making more environmentally friendly products puts me over the top on my choice here, and

the overall image quality, size, shape, and weight are great. The depth of field is superb, and although they aren't necessarily the best in any other category, they are consistently one of the best in almost every aspect. I would, however, like to see the Monarchs with a slightly better close focus and improved brightness. (I prefer the brightest binocular I can find, as long as the tradeoff with other characteristics isn't too great.) But I especially want to see improvements in the customer and retailer service departments of Nikon. They make a great product, but now they need to add the great service. We all know someone with a Nikon repair horror story, and the Monarchs—and other new products—can be very difficult for retailers to stock, making it difficult to find one to buy at times.

I reiterate that I prefer the Monarchs, but that you may prefer another model. Since all of these models are so close in overall quality and price—and hence value—they really need to be taken for a test drive. None is perfect, but none is dismissible either. Some models excel in one category, whereas others are lacking in another feature. Decide which features are more important to you—field of view, brightness, weight, etc.—in order to decide which of these binoculars is best for your birding needs.

Whether you're a very experienced birder who uses an \$1,800 binocular and wants an extra one for under the car seat or the living room table, or a brand new member of the birding community who just wants a good, durable, high-quality binocular for a reasonable price, take a look at some of these binoculars and see for yourself just how far this price range has come in the past few years.

Table 1. To facilitate a quick comparison of the seven models reviewed in this article, a summary of their important features is given here. The specifications provided below are those listed by the manufacturer.

	Size ¹	MAP/MSP ²	MSRP ³	Exit Pupil (mm)	Weight (oz.)	Eye Relief (mm)	Close Focus (feet)	FOV ⁴ (feet)
Alpen Apex	8×42	\$340.00	\$480.00	5.25	24.0	20.0	5.0	341
Bushnell Legend	8×42	– n. a. –	\$399.95	5.25	30.1	18.0	6.0	330
Leupold Olympics	8×42	– n. a. –	\$384.95	5.25	21.8	18.0	7.5	325
Leupold Pinnacles	8×42	– n. a. –	\$494.95	5.25	23.0	17.8	6.6	341
Nikon Monarchs	8×42	\$289.95	\$430.95	5.25	21.5	19.6	8.2	330
Pentax DC HR II	8×42	\$279.95	\$342.00	5.25	27.5	22.0	13.1	330
Swift Ultra-lites	8×42	\$399.95	\$399.95	5.25	24.0	19.5	6.0	341

¹Magnification power × objective lens diameter in mm

²Minimum advertised/sale price (if applicable) as set by the manufacturer

³Manufacturer's suggested retail price

⁴Field of view at 1,000 yards