

A review of "mid-priced" HD binoculars

(published in Finnish in Linnut 4/2012)



Following Zeiss's introduction of their FL series of binoculars less than ten years ago, we have seen a steadily increasing flow of binoculars from a growing number of manufacturers incorporating special dispersion glasses that refract the various wavelengths of visible light more accurately onto the same focal point. From the point of view of birders, this is a welcome trend, as these "HD" binoculars, as they are most commonly labelled, generally offer noticeably better image quality compared to similar models utilizing more traditional glass types. A few years back, Chinese optical factories started producing much more affordable binoculars made with Chinese-produced ED glass, and today we can choose from models starting as low as under 300€ while some of the top European models are priced over 2,000€.

For this roundup, I got to test a selection of interesting new models: the 640€ Hawke 8x43 Sapphire ED, the 890€ Kite Ibis 8x42 ED, the 520€ Nikon Monarch 7 8x42 and the 845€ & 895€ Zeiss Conquest 8x42 HD & 10x42 HD. All the binoculars in this test are waterproof and nitrogen-filled, so they should be fogproof.

The Zeiss Conquest HDs are completely redesigned models rather than mere upgrades of the previous Conquest series. With their rugged metal bodies, they now feel reassuringly solid, their rubber armoring is pleasant to the touch, and the large focussing wheel is well placed and has excellent feel. Focusing is light, precise and the gearing is just right for my taste. For diopter adjustment, you turn a ring around the right eyepiece. This makes setting the diopter easy, and there is enough friction in the ring to keep the setting in place. I actually prefer this method of diopter control over the more complex click-stop systems incorporated into pull-out focus knobs that have become the fashion in high-end binoculars lately. Eye-relief (which I measured from the plane of the eyecup rim, not the eyepiece lens surface) was sufficient for viewing with glasses on, being 16mm for the 10x model and 17.5mm for the 8x model. However, in the 8x Conquest, the eyecups did not twist out quite far enough for comfortable viewing without glasses, and I needed to brace the eyecups against my brow in order to obtain a relaxed image. Otherwise, black shadowing would appear along the edges of the view as the eye got too close to the exit pupil. The 10x model was a bit easier on the eye in this respect as it has just that much less eye-relief. Both binoculars had very high image quality. The image is bright and clear, contrast is excellent, color rendition is natural and

vibrant, and sharpness is excellent. The sharp area around the image center is wide enough, and although the edges are markedly softer, the image quality at the field edges was more than acceptable. The Zeiss Conquest HDs were the best binoculars in this tryout, and are priced surprisingly competitively, especially considering the brand and the fact that they are made in Germany.

The next best image quality was offered by the Japanese Kite Ibis 8x42 ED. With the Ibis, the image was not quite as impressively natural as in the Zeiss pair, but it was certainly very close. The field of view is a tad narrower, and the image is not quite as bright. On the other hand, the field edges were a bit sharper in the Kite. Viewing was easy and natural both with and without eyeglasses, and the slender two-hinged body handled very well. The Kite Ibis is also about 30g lighter than the 8x42 Zeiss (770g vs 800g – these are measured weights; published weights are often unreliable). Despite its lightness and slender design, the binocular feels solid and well-made. Under a cap in the front hinge is a thread for a tripod adapter for easy finnstick attachment. The Kite Ibis ED is a quality binocular that is a joy to use. Since the fit of binoculars both to the eyes and to the hands of a particular user is highly individual, buyers considering binoculars in this price range should whenever possible try them out for themselves. The Kite and Zeiss binoculars tested here are so evenly matched on image quality, while rather different in design and ergonomics, that it is likely that different users will rank them differently.

The Hawke Sapphire ED 8x43 is an improved version of the “Chinese wonder binocular,” the Hawke Frontier ED. Differences from the less expensive Frontier are primarily the dielectric prism coatings that improve light throughput, and a somewhat refined, more streamlined body design. The improved coatings give the image slightly higher brightness, better contrast and more natural color rendition than in the Frontier ED, but the difference is really quite small. The dual hinged body of the Sapphire fits the hands well, feels solid, offers an adapter thread in the front hinge and has large, comfortable twist-out eyecups. I measured their weight as 785g and the eye-relief as 16.5mm. Image quality at field center is excellent, the image is sharp and natural, but the field edges are soft. The sharp area around the center is wide enough, but when you look past it, sharpness deteriorates rapidly. Another complaint I have concerns the focus mechanism, which has a couple of millimeters of play before it engages, and once it does, it feels stiff and sticky. The new Hawke is a very good binocular for sure, but since it is priced about midway between its sister model that is nearly as good and the models in this review that are somewhat better both optically and mechanically, it faces stiff competition.

The last place in this comparison goes to Nikon’s new Monarch 7 8x42 HD. In the Nikon lineup, Monarch has for many years been a mid-priced series with a good price-performance ratio, and the “7” version comes with HD lens elements and a redesigned body. It is a light (683g) binocular that sits well in the hands and comes with the widest field of view (8°) among the binoculars in this review. Midfield, the image quality is fine, but the problem here is that the sharp central area is small, and beyond it, the image quality deteriorates very quickly towards the edges of the field. For a large portion of the field edge area, the image is so blurry that the wide field of view is next to worthless. Viewing is not that easy and relaxing when you have to pay more attention than usual on keeping the target centered. Measured 14mm eye-relief is not very generous, but an eyeglass-wearer will be able to see as much of the field as is worth seeing. The large focus wheel is well positioned and pleasant to the touch, but its movement is a bit sticky. The Monarch also comes with a tripod attachment thread. The new Nikon Monarch 7 is not a bad binocular, but for a similar investment there are better options.

- Kimmo Absetz

first d last a welho d com