

## LIVING

EDITOR: ROB McCORMICK 745-4641 ext. 244 / fax 743-4581 / life@peterboroughexaminer.com

# BINOCULARS & BOOKS

These two things can make all the difference between a pleasurable birding experience and an exercise in frustration



Special to The Examiner

One reason for the increased interest in birds and birding these days is the availability of vastly improved binoculars and field guides.

Superb optics that are both lightweight and affordable make looking at birds more enjoyable than ever and allow beginners to become skilled more quickly.

In addition, the new generation of field guides is more detailed and better illustrated than 20 or 30 years ago, making the process of bird identification easier.

Owning a pair of good binoculars can make all the difference in the world between a pleasurable birding experience and an exercise in eye strain and frustration.

Although some of the terminology regarding binoculars can be confusing, beginning birders really only need to bear in mind the following considerations.

**Magnification Binoculars** — always carry two numbers separated by an X. The first number refers to the power or magnification and is usually seven, eight or 10.

It indicates how many times an image appears closer to you than with the eye alone. In the case of 7X35 binoculars, the bird you're looking at would appear seven times closer.

High power binoculars such as 10X are difficult for some people to hold steady, however, and image shake can be a problem.

Many birders find 8 power bins the best compromise. They provide good magnification but also offer a wider field of vision than 10X. It's therefore easier to actually locate a bird with the binoculars and follow it as it moves around.

**Brightness** — The second number, 35 in our example, refers to the diameter in millimeters of the two large lenses where the light first enters. They are called objective lenses.

Theoretically, a larger lens allows more light to come in and provides a brighter, more detailed image. This can be important in low light conditions such as birding in dense forests or at dusk and dawn. However, large lenses also add to the weight of the glasses. 40 or 42 millimeters is a popular choice with many birders.

**Design Binoculars** — come in two basic designs. The traditional design is called porro prism. The objective lenses are offset from the eyepieces. Porro prism glasses tend

to be less expensive but are usually not as rugged. They also may be heavier, especially the high power ones. Roof prism binoculars, on the other hand, have a straight tube design because the objective lenses are in line with the eyepieces. This gives them a slimmer, streamlined look. Roof prism models are also lighter, more durable and easier to waterproof. However, you may have to pay a little more. They are the choice of most serious birders.

**Focus** — How close you can focus is also something to consider. Quite often a bird will be only 10 feet or less away, but you will still need to use binoculars to see it properly. Therefore, a good birding binocular should have what's known as "close focus." Not only will you be able to study birds up close, but when birds aren't available, you can watch butterflies and dragonflies. The closer a binocular focuses, the better. Also, be sure to buy a pair of binoculars with a central focus that you can turn comfortably and smoothly with your index finger.

**Lens Coatings** — A proper coating on the lens will greatly increase light transmission and therefore improve image brightness. Choose binoculars that are at least "fully coated" (FC) or Multi-Coated (MC).

**Weight Neck** — and back strain can sometimes become a problem if you are birding for long periods of time. Consequently, the lighter your glasses are, the better. Binoculars can range in weight from 10 oz (compact 8x25s) up to 44 oz (large 10x50s). As a general guideline, choose a binocular that weighs less than 30 oz. Although compact binoculars are lightweight, they are not as bright or as comfortable to handle. I would not recommend buying them if they are to be your only pair.

**Strap** — In most cases, the strap that comes with the binoculars is not adequate. It is therefore important to invest in a good, foam-padded strap. If strain still becomes a problem, some people opt for a binocular harness. Although comfortable, a harness makes the binoculars hard to share with others.

**Waterproofing Waterproof** — optics provide protection against water and internal fogging. Birders inevitably get caught in the rain, and the last thing you want to do is be using your binocular case. By the time you get the binoculars out of the case, the bird will usually have flown off! Waterproofing is therefore highly desirable. It's also an important option for anyone planning on birding in the

tropics.

**Eye cups** — If you wear glasses, be sure to choose a pair of binoculars that can be adjusted for use without having to remove your glasses. In most cases this can be achieved by simply rolling down or adjusting the rubber eyecups. This will allow you to see the widest possible field of view through your binoculars. If you don't wear glasses, leave the eyecups fully extended.

**Field of vision** — Field of vision refers to the size of the area you see when looking through your binoculars. A wider FOV may help beginners to locate birds more easily and follow them as they move about. However, the greater the magnification, the narrower the field-of-view.

Also, less expensive models of binoculars usually obtain a wide angle of vision at the expense of image sharpness.

**Comfort** — Be sure the binoculars are a good match for your hand size and feel comfortable to use. It's important, too, that the focus knob be easy to reach.

**Price** — You probably will have to pay at least \$150 to get a pair of binoculars you'll be happy with, although some surprisingly good porro prism models may sell for less. If keeping cost to a minimum is a concern, buy a good lower power model such as a 7X or 8X rather than a 10X magnification in a lower quality binocular.

It is probably best to stay with standard rather than wide angle view.

Numerous models of excellent binoculars are available these days. Top of the line bins include those made by Swarovski, Leica, and Zeiss.

Expect to pay well in excess of a thousand dollars for the very best models, however. Great mid-range priced binoculars include a number of models by Bushnell, Stokes, Swift, Pentax and Nikon, to name a few.

The Nikon Monarch 8x42 and 8X36, Eagle Optics Ranger SRT, Bushnell Elite 2 and Vortex Viper offer exceptional value. These

binoculars range in price from about \$200 to \$500. Some great bins for under \$200 to consider are the Audubon 8x42 Raptor, the Bushnell Nature View and Excursion series, and the Opticron 8x42 Imagic

As your interest in birding grows, you may at some point wish to invest in a spotting scope. This is a compact telescope used in situations that require magnifications beyond the range of a typical binocular.

Spotting scopes are often essential for getting good looks at distant shorebirds on a beach, hawks perched in a distant tree or a raft of ducks out on a lake etc.

They also have applications for photography. Magnification will range from about 20X to 250X, using either fixed or zoom eyepieces.

Like binoculars, the best and most expensive scopes available are made by Swarovski, Kowa, Zeiss and Leica. Scopes in the middle price range include models by Bushnell, Pentax, Nikon, Celestron, and Vortex.

If you purchase a good scope, don't make the mistake of buying a cheap tripod.

An investment in a smoothly functioning and stable tripod can be just as rewarding as the one made for the scope itself.

It's important to be able to test different models of binoculars and spotting scopes side by side before laying down any money.

This is even more essential if, like me, you bird with eyeglasses. Some local stores that carry binoculars include Accuracy Plus, Wildrock, and Peterborough Photo Service. You may, however, want to consider a trip to Toronto to a store such as Henry's or Efston Science.

Their products can also be viewed online.

A huge selection of optical equipment, bird books and nature-related products of all kinds is also available at a Quebec City based

store called Le Naturaliste.

Visit their website at [www.lenaturaliste.ca/en/](http://www.lenaturaliste.ca/en/)

When it comes to field guides, make sure you choose a guide that has a range map right beside the illustration.

Paintings of the birds are also preferable to photographs. Most birders tend to use one (or more) of the following guides: The Sibley Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America, the National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, and the Peterson Birds of Eastern and Central North America. I personally prefer the Sibley because of its more convenient size and weight and the multiple plumages it shows of each bird.

A great reference book to have at home or keep in the car is another Sibley title known simply as the Sibley Guide to the Birds.

It has more than 6,600 illustrations, by far the most in any modern field guide to North American birds. There are an average of eight pictures per bird.

However, it is too big to be taken out into the field with you.

Two other excellent Sibley publications are the Sibley Guide to Birding Basics and the Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behaviour.

All of the above books are available locally through Titles and Chapters.

Finally, the next time you are in Algonquin Park, be sure to visit the bookstore at the Visitors Centre. It has probably the best selection of bird and nature books of any store in Ontario.

*Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year in the Kawarthas. He can be reached at [dmonkman1@cogeco.ca](mailto:dmonkman1@cogeco.ca). Visit his website at [www.drewmonkman.com](http://www.drewmonkman.com). Karl Egressy is a Guelph nature photographer. To see more of his work and to contact him, go to [www.kegressy.com](http://www.kegressy.com)*



OUR CHANGING SEASONS  
Drew Monkman