

PETE'S TIPS: Spotting Scope Eyepieces—Zoom vs. Fixed

It's one of the Big Three questions scope buyers ask.

"Should I buy a fixed-power eyepiece or a zoom?" There is no wrong answer, but there is a right answer. If that doesn't make sense, just keep reading.

Fixed eyepieces offering a single magnification were once considered optically superior to zoom, or variable-power, eyepieces, but this is no longer the case with high-end optics. Fixed-power eyepieces come in a variety of magnifications from 15x to 60x, with wide-field (or wide-angle) 20x, 30x, and 32x the most popular. They have the advantage of offering, for the most part, a wider field of view, making it easier to find subjects and to work flocks of birds.

Fixed powers also offer the subtle, perhaps not so significant advantage of providing a standard basis for size comparison. You've probably had the experience of using a 7x or 8x binocular, then switching to a 10x and blowing an identification because the bird you were studying seemed much too large to be a (fill in the blank). The same thing can happen with a scope if you inadvertently leave it on a higher magnification (like 40x) when you commonly scan at, say, 20x. Also worth considering: fixed powers are usually less expensive than zooms—sometimes by a couple of hundred dollars.

Zoom eyepieces offer greater magnification as needed—an advantage when studying very distant objects or making identifications that hinge on fine details. Many people conclude that the greater magnification is responsible for the

zoom's detail-discerning superiority, but this is only partially true. Often, particularly when subjects are backlit, it is the constricted field of view that is most advantageous.

With zoom lenses, as power increases, field of view decreases. A decreased field of view means that less peripheral light reaches your eye, and your pupil expands, allowing you to perceive more color and detail. Fixed, wide-angle eyepieces let in lots of light, so that your pupil contracts and all you see is a silhouette.

Fixed, wide-angle lenses: better for scanning. Zoom lenses: better for study. Which should you buy? Both. Use the fixed for scanning. Have the zoom on hand for study when the situation dictates. Can't afford both? It's up to you. Me? I go with a fixed 30x or 32x because it's a good, versatile power and for many scopes (particularly those with 60-65mm objectives) the highest magnification you can use before the image begins to degrade. But I tend to look at plumage details less than many birders, and I often use my scope to pick up birds in flight (where a wider field is helpful). Let your need and brand of birding dictate your choice. When it comes to you and your needs, you are the only expert.

Pete Dunne is the Director of New Jersey Audubon's Cape May Bird Observatory and the author of Pete Dunne on Bird Watching. His newest book, Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion, will be published this spring.

Yesterday's News

The Big Day is a venerable birding institution, but only in the 1970s did it start to assume its modern competitive aspect in North America. With the stakes raised, it became crucial to have just the right people on a team:

"The only tip to Big Day success we will offer is to avoid the temptation to make the rounds with a huge team in a bus. An ideal team will probably not exceed four members. They should be proficient, active, cooperative, non-dawdling, non-straying, enthusiastic and honest birders. Dawdlers are perhaps the biggest drag on the effort.... The fellow who makes a big production of a common bird, or who always strikes off on his own and can't be found when it is time to go, kills precious time." (John B. Edscom, in *Birding* Vol. 3, no. 1)

And the wages of straying?

"It should be understood that if any person wanders off from the rest of the party when the leader says it is time to get out of that habitat and go to the next, the person who has strayed will be abandoned. There is no time to search for lost members of the party." (Edwin I. Stearns, in *Birding* Vol. 3, no. 2)

4th North American Ornithological Conference

The 4th North American Ornithological Conference will be held October 3-7, 2006, in Veracruz, Mexico. NAOCs are held every 4 years and bring together ornithologists from across the hemisphere. This fourth Conference has been organized jointly by the American Ornithologists' Union, Association of Field Ornithologists, CIPAMEX (Sección Mexicana de Consejo Internacional para la Preservación de las Aves), Cooper Ornithological Society, Raptor Research Foundation, Society of Canadian Ornithologists / Société des Ornithologistes du Canada, Waterbird Society, and Wilson Ornithological Society.

The conference theme is "Wings Without Borders." Sessions will feature a rich program of symposia, plenary lectures, business meetings, and social activities. Pre- and post-conference activities will include training workshops and tours focusing on birding, culture, and nature.

More than 700 bird species have been reported in Veracruz, including more than 230 neotropical migrants and 20 Mexican endemics. The conference is scheduled to coincide with the peak of migration in the world's largest raptor migration bottleneck.

Mark your calendars now! Full details are available at www.naoc2006.org.