

PETE'S TIPS

The Little Things

By PETE DUNNE

Most birders can recount the basic qualities that define a birding binocular: Good resolution, bright image, flat and distortion-free field, wide field of view, good depth of field, close focus, quick focus, rugged, waterproof, light weight, etc., etc.

But there is a surprising number of secondary or ancillary qualities or considerations that make or break a purchase. After twenty years of fitting birders to optics, here are some of the undermining considerations that have, in the hands of individual buyers, undermined a binocular's suitability.

Perhaps the most common shortfall relates to interpupillary distance. A surprising number of individuals (particularly women) find that barrels of otherwise utilitarian instruments fail to adjust close enough to accommodate the distance between their eyes. The industry standards were very probably set when hunters and the military (both traditionally male-dominated institutions) constituted the target market in the optics industry. Birding has brought more women into the market, but most binocular manufacturers have been slow to recalibrate their design standards to accommodate individuals with slighter frames.

The new Leupold Yosemite 6x30 is, hopefully, a sign of more market-calibrated things to come.

Another sticking point (sometimes literally) is the focus wheels. What seems "mushy" to one person might be "smooth" to another. Some people object to the slurping sound of lavishly applied lubricants. Others find fault with lag, or unproductive dead space that brackets the functional range of focus on some binoculars (the old Zeiss 10x40 was infamous for this). I've even known some people who object to the Leica Ultravid's tendency to stop on a dime (i.e., the wheel stops when your finger does).

Me? I call it "precise." Other people call it "stiff."

A number of instruments (particularly those coming out of Asia) show a warm or red color bias. Women, who are generally more sensitive to colors than men (haven't you ever wondered why more men are red/green color-blind?), may find this particularly disconcerting.

Artist and tour leader Louise Zemaitis (who used to run CMBO's store) was particularly sensitive to the slight red bias inherent in many Nikon instruments.

"Ooooooh," she'd moan. "They turn the world PINK!"

And they did. For Louise. But if they don't for you, don't sweat

it. It's not your problem, it's not a problem.

Other people are more troubled by the ergonomics or feel of an instrument. Some people find the eyecups on certain makes and models too large, too small, or too hard and painful when brought to their eyes. On some hands, the strap attachment of some instruments cuts into the soft fleshy area between the thumb and index finger. I even met a woman who loved the Zeiss 7x42 Classic but couldn't buy them because her hands were so sensitive that the raised rubber armor hurt!

I sold another instrument (a Kowa, I believe) to a woman who had to return it. It turned out that the woman was severely latex-sensitive. The instrument made her hands and face itchy and red.

Armor coverings are funny things. I remember that Zeiss used to have a line of instruments (the "Night Owl" line) that made the inside of my car smell like urine if I left the instrument exposed on a sun-heated back seat. Nice glass (if you didn't mind the weight or the smell).

My point? No instrument is perfect for all birders. When testing binoculars, don't just address the obvious needs and standards. Test and examine every instrument for that niggling congenital defect that is invisible to most birders but becomes manifest in your hands.

It doesn't matter how many people love and praise a particular make and model of binocular, if it's not right for you. That's why there's more than one binocular on the planet. That's why you should test a variety of makes and models before you buy.

Pete Dunne is the Director of New Jersey Audubon's Cape May Bird Observatory and the author of numerous books, including Pete Dunne on Bird Watching, Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion, and The Art of Fishing.

Winter's Edge

By DOUG EMKALNS (1958-2006)

The cranes spiral southward warm thermals delight
As winter's edge advances
Like the glistening edge of a butcher's knife
Ravenous, swift destroyer of life
Aching to fledge in the fading autumn light
Mother nature allows them few second chances

Blackbirds have left by the millions it seems
As winter's edge enhances
Bleak, crystalline aurora moon beams

Cold and nightmarish starvation screams
Certain death for these bandits and fiends
Most dare not challenge these arctic prances

Gulf warmth at the coastline flocks safely alight
As winter's edge finances
Crushing mounds of northern, blinding white
Nourishment glaciated and buried with spite
Muscle to ravage late southbound flights
Only frozen memories of spirited, spring courtship dances.

Douglas A.E. Emkalns was a long-time ABA member, known to many for his discovery of the second US record of Gray Silky-Flycatcher and the first verified New Mexico Ruff.