

Battle of the Binoculars

Before you hit the road to go bird-watching, make sure you've got a great pair of bins.

By Birds & Blooms Staff

Picking out that perfect pair of binoculars can be both fun and overwhelming. With so many brands and models on the market, setting you back from a modest \$100 to \$2,500 and up, how do you choose a pair that's perfect for you?

We can help! This summer the B&B staff, along with frequent birding contributor Ken Keffer, conducted a binocular field test. We tried out pairs from 10 different manufacturers, taping over the brand names to make it a fair test. If we learned one major lesson from our experiment, it's that everyone is different. Nearly all 10 of us had a different favorite for one reason or another, which you'll see in our results. While we're not necessarily crowning one pair the ultimate winner, we do think our picks will serve as a good basic guide. Ready to start shopping? The birds are waiting!

Best for Beginners

Celestron NatureDX 8x42
\$139.95

If you're just starting to go birding, we understand that you might not want to spend a lot of money on binoculars. If that strikes a chord, these are for you! Many of our testers rated them higher than more expensive brands. Lightweight and easy to focus, they're the ideal starter binoculars.



Best Overall Comfort

Eagle Optics Ranger ED 8x42
\$329.99

Want comfort? These are your binoculars. They're light light and easy to hold, which our testers love. These bins are also a great deal—many experienced birders swear by their Rangers. So rest assured this is a solid first, second or even third pair of binoculars.



Best Bang for Your Buck

Nikon Monarch 7 8x42
\$479.95

These stole the heart of Senior Editor Kirsten Sweet, and seriously impressed many other testers. They're the perfect binoculars for those looking to go beyond the basics but not quite ready to break the bank. Described by Kirsten as a great deal, these will last you years with their sturdy modern design.

LEFT: JIM WIELAND



Frequent *Birds & Blooms* writer Ken Keffer helped us with our binocular field test.



Best First Impression

Carson TD-842 ED 8x42 3D Binocular
\$395

They say you don't get a second chance to make a good first impression—and if that's the case, these binoculars take top honors. These Carsons had a great look and feel. The view was nice, too, making them quite a hit with many of our testers.



Best Midrange

Vanguard Endeavor ED II 8420
\$499

If you've moved beyond the lowest-priced binoculars but aren't ready to commit to a high-end pair, consider this choice. We liked the clarity of close-up images and the clear illumination of the subject. These will serve you well at the stage of your birding life when you're not quite an expert but no longer a newbie.

WHERE TO BUY

We recommend eagleoptics.com because they sell many different brands and have good prices. Otherwise, start with each company's website. Not all are set up to sell online, but they'll tell you where you can buy.

Best for Backyard Birding

Kowa BD42-08XD
\$519

Do the rest of the choices on this list seem a little daunting? If you're just looking to enjoy the birds in your own backyard, consider these Kowas. Small and compact, they're ideal for keeping by your window for the moment you spot that bird you've been trying to attract for ages.



Best Splurge

Leica Ultravid HD 8x42
\$2,199

If you've graduated to birding beyond the backyard, consider these Leicas. With a wide field of view, gorgeous clarity and impeccable lighting, they'll allow you to spot almost any target you choose. Our testers said that just looking at and holding them made it obvious they were beautifully crafted. You won't be sorry you splurged.



TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

We strongly recommend testing out binoculars for yourself. Look for a birding festival in your area: Optics dealers often set up shop there, allowing you to test many brands and styles. Otherwise, call a birding or outdoors store near you to see if they have samples.



Best for Birding on the Go

Zeiss Terra 8x42
\$399.99

Great lighting, ease of focus, fantastic clarity—these won lots of praise from our reviewers. While Zeiss is a brand typically known for binoculars running \$1,000 and up, these deliver high quality at a reasonable price. No matter the terrain, they're sturdy and ready for anything.



Best Clarity and Field of View

Opticron Explorer Wide Angle 8x42
\$329

Editor Stacy Tornio couldn't say enough good things about these Explorers. It came as no surprise that this wide-angle pair had the best field of view, but the clarity of the images and the ease of focus were impressive, too.



Best for Serious Birders

Swarovski EL 10x42
\$2,866

Got some money burning a hole in your pocket? Consider these Swarovskis. The higher magnification allows for greater discernment of detail and makes them excellent for long-distance birding. Some testers thought they were heavy, but the quality justifies the extra weight and bucks.

Criteria Breakdown

Want to know how we came to score each criterion? Here are the areas we looked at. We hope these guidelines will help you find your perfect pair!

- **First impression.** You should like what you see at first glance.
- **Comfort.** They should feel comfortable in the hand and easy to hold.
- **Focus.** Binoculars should be easy to focus instantly and precisely.
- **Field of view.** The field of view should be fairly wide, with no distorted edges.
- **Clarity of image.** Whether you're focusing close up or far away, you want a great picture.
- **Lighting.** The image should be as bright as or brighter than what you can see with your naked eye, not darker.