

The best optics and outdoor products tried & tested for you

SCOPE

KOWA PROMINAR TSN-99A

£3,449 (with TE-11WZII zoom eyepiece)

Last month we took a close look at the Kowa Prominar TSN-99A spotting scope, and you'll remember that we were mighty impressed with it.

But there was a lot to say about it. So, this month, we ran it past a long-term Kowa scope user (our own Mike Weedon), and a casual birder who's thinking about buying a full-size scope to complement his travel scope. Oh, and we also used the TSN-99A for a bit of phone-scoping. First, what did Mike have to say?

The Kowa user

I have been the proud owner of a Kowa Prominar TSN-823M angled scope (with 32xW LER and later 30x eyepiece) since 2006. I upgraded from a TSN-821 for that extra clarity of image of the fluoride glass, especially apparent when it came to digiscoping.

Indeed, the 823 has been a wonderful scope for digiscoping, and the scope I used throughout the production of *Bird Watching's* popular Digiscoping Made Easy DVD (remember that?).

At the time, I felt my Kowa



scope was class-leading, particularly at the very reasonable price it went for, back in the Noughties. I still use my scope all the time, and feel it easily outclasses most scopes I come across in the field, with a clear, colour-neutral (to my eyes) and fringe-free image, a very good field of view and a general ease of use.

Although I have my scope wrapped in a padded case, underneath it has always been a slightly odd-looking scope, though, with the angled eyepiece set 'to the right', so it feels like you are birding round corners somewhat. But I am very used to it and love it.

That said, I have become aware in recent years that scopes have come along which outclass my old Kowa without trying. Yes, there is a price to pay, but the top modern scopes are brighter, more

detailed and frankly better than my trusty old 823.

Side by side with the Prominar TSN-99A, I was acutely aware that my workhorse produces a 'misty' image compared to the devastatingly crisp, realistic, bright and crystal clarity of the TSN-99 (it would surely be sensational for digiscoping or phonescoping).

What I had always been satisfied with suddenly became a little disappointing. The ergonomics, looks, central dual-speed focusing wheel and even the colour of the 99 made my old faithful seem dated and clunky.

But it was the image which made me want to upgrade: misty and dull will never beat crystal-clear and bright! In its favour, my 823 is a lighter-weight model (and is the weight I am used to, of

course). But everything else makes me want to go birding all the time with the TSN-99. If only I could afford one...



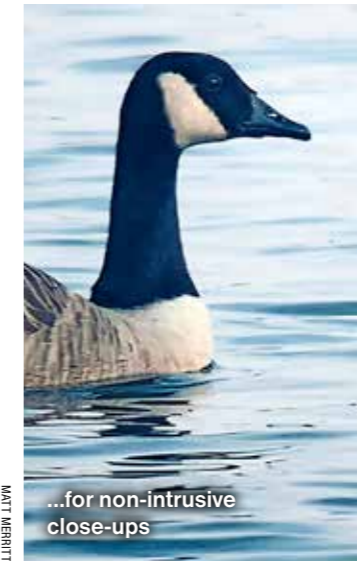
TOM BAILEY

The phonescoper

I'm no photographer, and I'm not much of a phonescoper either, writes Matt Merritt. But the latter is partly because I've always found it fiddly, and a bit more trouble than it's worth when all I'm really after are record shots.

So I tried the TSN-IPXR RP (approx. £90) with the new TSN-99A. That XR in the designation is because it's designed for iPhone XRs – you need to get the appropriate version for your phone.

The phone slips inside easily enough, but is held very securely. You could easily leave it on for long periods, and it would give your phone a fair bit of protection, although the screen is uncovered.



MATT MERRITT

You then attach the appropriate adapter ring (TSN-AR11WZ, in this case), which fits snugly over the eyepiece.

And that's its attraction – within a minute of setting up, you're able to take pics easily, with no vignetting or similar. Take your time, and you can get something really special, but the ease of use is what stood out for me – it doesn't intrude upon your birding.

One reminder. As we mentioned last month, you do need a good sturdy tripod, for this even more than birding, or the ease of use will mean nothing. But get that right, and this does exactly what you want an adapter to do.

The upgrader

Kirk Parsons is a casual birder, living in South Derbyshire, and has been thinking about buying a larger scope for those occasions when he needs a bit more punch (he's been using an Opticron MM2 for years, and is very happy with it).

Trying the new TSN-99A, he said: "Even at full zoom, it feels like a wide field of view, with no real tunnel vision effect. The image is very clear and the colour natural, and I've found the focus action really smooth and easy to use.

He was equally impressed

when using it with the TE-80XW wide angle eyepiece.

"Wow! That really does feel like a very wide field of view, and again the image is just so sharp and clean."

One of the big questions, though, is how easy he'd find it to go from a travel scope to a jumbo-sized beauty like this.

"I'd be okay with carrying it around – it's obviously heavier but that wouldn't put me off. I'd still keep my MM alongside it, though – I do a lot of birding when traveling and it's just so convenient."



MATT MERRITT

BACKPACK

VANGUARD VEO SELECT 46BR BACKPACK, £109.99

Reviewed by David Chandler



There are plenty of backpacks out there – 60 on Vanguard's website alone, with prices from £49.99 to over £200. This one is not their most expensive offering, but does have features worth highlighting.

#1, its proportions. It's only 28cm wide yet has enough capacity to handle a reasonable amount of kit. I loaded mine with a Lumix G6 (a micro-four-thirds camera) with a 100-400mm zoom lens on, a 25mm standard lens, a 60mm macro lens and a 14-140mm zoom, and still had room in the main compartment for a Nikon ED50 scope. My iPad Mini went in the tablet sleeve, a travel tripod went on the side and a few bits and pieces went in the top space. It weighed 6,900g, of which 1,380g were the bag itself. Carrying this load was comfortable and if the shoulder straps slip you can use the chest harness to stop that! There's an airflow system on the back, a simple, tuck-away waist belt, and a top grab handle.

#2, the access options. Unzipping the rear gives you full access apart from the top daypack section – which can be removed. If you have removed it, you can set the pack up for top access. There are memory card pockets on the inside of the top access. But perhaps most usefully, you can access your camera from either side – so this works for left-handers as well as right-handers; and it works pretty well for quick-draw photography – release the pack from one shoulder, slide it round towards your front, open the side panel and grab your camera. As a bonus, in this position the pack provides a bit of support to rest on while you shoot. There's a tripod foot pouch and tripod strap on each side of the pack. This works well enough for carrying a tripod – alternatively, the pouch would cope with a water bottle – though a deeper pouch would be better. And if you are unzipping the back panel somewhere damp you'll appreciate the protection provided by the rubber-like material on the front of the pack. The base is protected from the damp, too, and if you're out in the rain, you can deploy the seam-sealed rain cover. The pack is well-made, padded on every side, and is customisable – you can remove all the interior padded dividers to create a regular backpack.

There are also a few nice touches for air travel. You can use it as your carry-on, there's a strap for slipping over the handle of your pull-along luggage, and a hidden pocket for a passport.

● Available in black or green; 2 yr. warranty; Different sizes available. vanguardworld.co.uk

VERDICT

A very good backpack – slim and versatile with some nice touches. The price isn't outrageous either.