



Binocular Basics

Binoculars are a very important, if not essential, part of birding. Aside from our own eyes and ears, they are the primary tool by which we can differentiate between birds at a distance. There are many brands and models to choose from, and picking a pair that is well suited to your needs is key. Here we hope to provide you with some pointers on choosing, using, and caring for your binoculars.

WHY ALL THE NUMBERS?

Most binoculars bear two numbers printed somewhere on the body, separated by an "x" (such as 7x35 or 8x40). The first number in front of the "x" (7x, 8x, 10x, etc.) tells you what level of magnification (or power) the binoculars will deliver. A pair of 7 power binoculars will make the goldfinch at your feeder seem 7 times closer. However, the higher the magnification, the smaller the area (or field of view) you'll get to see through the bins, and the steadier you have to be while holding them. Although a pair of 10 power binoculars will allow you to see greater detail than a pair of 7 or 8 power binos, you will end up seeing less of the area around the bird, and may find the image a little shaky. These factors can make it harder to find and track a bird through your high powered binos.

The second number (after the "x") tells you the width of each the front lenses in millimeters. Why would you want to know such technical details? Experiment by comparing an object through 7x35 and 7x40 binoculars to find out. You should notice a difference in the clarity of images you see. The larger the front lenses, the more light they will "gather," and the brighter and crisper the image should be.

WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH BIRDING?

Generally speaking, 7x35 or 8x40 are the most practical binoculars to have for birding. They work well in the forest or in the backyard, gather a fair bit of light and have a relatively large "field of view."



Photo by Joan Condon, GA, 2012 GBBC

Although 10 power binoculars tend to be heavier and have a narrower field of view, many experienced birders prefer the higher magnification they provide.



Recumbant-biker-birder, Pamela Graber. FL, 2012 GBBC

OTHER FACTORS

When purchasing your binoculars consider weight, durability, degree of weatherproofing and overall size. The price will vary with brand name, lens quality, magnification, lens size, weather proofing, and other more technical design matters. Hold and look through as many different types of binoculars as you can before purchasing. Keep in mind what you will do with them. Will they be comfortable to carry around? Will they fit in your glove compartment or backpack? Can you hold them up for more than 10 minutes? Does the bird you're looking at seem to be sitting in the fog on a sunny day in Reno, Nevada? Take your time, and get the pair of binoculars best suited to your needs and your budget.

AND NOW, FOR YOUR VIEWING PLEASURE...

Once you've bought or borrowed some binoculars, you're going to want to do a little practicing. To some, spying a Purple Finch at the top of a pine tree and then looking at it through binoculars is easy as can be. To others, locating a bird through binoculars can be a little

more difficult. The key is to practice finding and focusing on fixed objects (like a bird feeder, license plate, streetlight, etc.) from various different angles and positions. There are a number of other little tricks to learn as well.

HERE ARE SOME QUICK TIPS:

1) The "Two for One"

Most binoculars have a hinge joining the sides together. This hinge allows people to adjust the binoculars according to the distance between their eyes. (We all have different sized heads.) If you don't adjust the binoculars correctly, you may end up seeing large black spots when you look from side to side, or see two blurry images of the same bird. Just push or pull the sides apart until you see one circular image.

2) "What Eye-Ring?"

Focusing binoculars is a two-part process. The main focusing wheel (usually at the top near the hinge) will bring the image into general focus. You may, however, have to adjust your binoculars to

accommodate for differences in the strength of each eye. In order to correct for your eyes, put your hand over the front lens on the side with the adjustable eyepiece (which is usually the right eyepiece), and focus on something in the middle distance (like your feeder at 30 feet). Then move the eyepiece as far as you can in a clockwise direction and look at your feeder through both sides of your binoculars. The image will now seem a little blurry. Now, while still observing the feeder, move the eyepiece in a counterclockwise direction. This should start to bring the image into focus. Keep turning until the image you see is as crisp as you can make it. Keep your eyes as relaxed as possible while doing this. You should not have to strain them to see small details such as an eye-ring on a flycatcher or the company logo on your feeder. When you're done adjusting, take a look at where you've ended up on the eyepiece's scale, and be sure to keep it at that number whenever you use these binoculars.

3) "A Good Look at a Bush"

Now we're ready to tackle the most crucial part of using binoculars: **getting them to your eyes while still keeping track of the bird**. This can be more difficult than it sounds, and only becomes "natural" with practice. Again, find a stationary object, such as an empty coffee can or your bird feeder, and focus on it. Then move and try it again from a different angle. Could you find it? Ignore the binoculars as you're bringing them up, and keep your eyes on the object. Chances are, you're not going to bring the binos up to your mouth or bonk your nose. If you keep an eye on the feeder, as opposed to your hands, your binoculars will automatically be pointed in the right direction when they pass over your eyes. Try it. Look at the feeder, **don't move your head**, and raise the binoculars up to your eyes.

There it is!



Wood Stork, Sandy Sharkey ON
2012 GBBC