REVIEW

Canon's new 36x12 IS III image-stabilised binoculars

Canon is the undisputed leader in affordable image-stabilised (IS) binoculars. Tiny gyro sensors detect any motion, and a sophisticated microprocessor corrects for the movement with special 'vari-angle' prisms. It sounds unlikely, but it works! The way they damp out virtually all handshake is quite surreal and makes you realise just how much compensating your eyes have to do when you use 'normal' binoculars.

However, they're not without their drawbacks. The IS system is reasonably power hungry, so you need to carry spare batteries (although you can use the binoculars without the IS system). Also, the extra equipment makes them rather large, cumbersome and, to my eyes at least, not that attractive. For birding, the pick of the crop is the 10x42 L IS WP, which has top-notch optics, reasonable close focus (2.5 metres) and is waterproof. However, it weighs about 1.2 kilograms, about half as much again as conventional 10x42 binoculars.

Another popular option is the smaller, cheaper and more powerful 12x36 IS II, which weighs just over 700 grams. The main drawbacks of the Mark II model were the poor close focus – six metres – and lack of waterproofing. I was thus interested to see whether Canon had addressed these issues in the newly released Mark III version. The short answer is no, but the story doesn't end here.

The main difference of the 12x36 IS III is an improved IS system. Canon claims the new model lasts more than twice as long as the Mark II on a set of two AA alkaline batteries, giving up to nine hours of continuous use at 25 °C (but this drops to barely an hour at -10 °C). It can also use rechargeable NiMh batteries, but this cuts battery life. However, this isn't a huge issue unless you spend hours looking through your binoculars. I tested a pair for several days without needing to change the original set of batteries. And you can't inadvertently leave them switched on, as the IS button has to be held down continuously to activate it.

The real improvement is how the IS works – it's quite brilliant. The older models were a bit jumpy and you could hear a faint whirring sound. No longer. Press the IS button, and within a split second the image stabilises. You can even use them in a moving car. The only slight vibration I noticed was in the teeth of a fierce south-east wind. The IS also copes well with flying birds, panning smoothly while keeping the view of the bird steady.

It's not clear from the press releases whether Canon have tweaked the lens coatings, but the optics are superb; bright and crisp across a remarkably flat field of view. Combined with the rock-steady image, you see details that your eyes gloss over with conventional binoculars. Try a pair next time you visit your favourite camera shop – I can almost guarantee that you will be impressed.

But should you buy a pair? They retail for about R9 300, which is great value for money compared to other IS binoculars. Unfortunately the close focus issue is likely to be a deal breaker for most birders. Canon claims these binoculars focus to six metres, but I could barely manage eight metres. Bring this down to two or three metres and they will be much more attractive. Add to the wish list a wider individual eyepiece adjustment range (currently only approximately three diopters), a splash guard for the eyepieces and a more ergonomic design and they will be runaway best sellers. For now, I'd love a pair for ship-based seabirding or scanning wader flocks, but as soon as I moved into more cluttered environments the inability to focus on close birds would force me to revert to my regular pair of binoculars.

PETER RYAN

FAQs

Wildlife photographer and safari guide Grant Atkinson answers readers' questions.

What is the optimal shutter speed when photographing birds in flight?

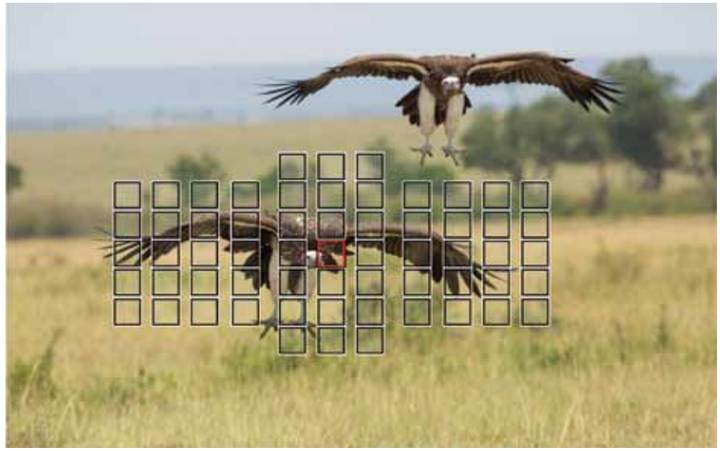
If I am looking to stop the rapid motion that a bird in flight presents and get images that are completely free of motion blur, then I need to make sure the shutter speed I choose is fast enough. For larger, slower-flying birds (for example, pelicans, storks, herons and cranes), I find approximately 1/1000 of a second to be sufficient, whereas for birds that fly faster than this (such as eagles, kites, harriers, gulls, skimmers, skuas, shearwaters and albatrosses), I might like to work with speeds around 1/2000 of a second. For ultra-fast birds (like falcons, goshawks, bee-eaters, kingfishers and sandgrouse) that are even difficult to follow in the camera viewfinder as a result of their sheer speed and often erratic flight path, I typically get my best results with shutter speeds of 1/3200 of a second or even faster.

Of course, I am not always free to choose what shutter speeds I want, as this is governed by the amount of prevailing natural light and my own choice of ISO sensitivity settings.

On the full-frame Canon DSLR bodies, I am comfortable going up to ISO 1600 at any stage, and on the smaller-sensor bodies (APS-C), also called crop-sensor, up to ISO 800. I don't expect to be able to take good quality, ultra-fast in-flight shots when the sun is not shining on my subjects.

These speeds are guidelines for me; if there is sufficient ambient light I always prefer to work at the faster speeds rather than the slower. I also seldom lower the ISO sensitivity settings on my cameras below ISO 400 for this kind of imagery, and mostly work at ISO 800.

Of course, another benefit of shooting using such fast shutter speeds is that camera shake is minimised.

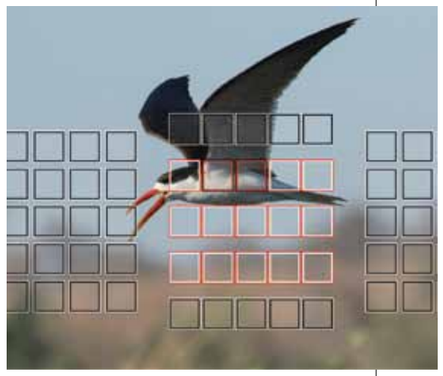


GRANT ATKINSON (2)

When photographing birds in flight, should I use a group of focus points or just a single one?

That is a question that can be more complex than it seems. The camera usually focuses fastest when just a single autofocus point is selected. On cheaper or older cameras, the centre focus point is often the most accurate, so using only a single point has its advantages. The disadvantage to using a single focus point is that it can be hard to locate the bird in the viewfinder when it is moving, and because the focus point covers only a small area it is also easy to accidentally move it away from the subject. I usually choose a single focus point (*above*) if the birds I am photographing are flying low, with backgrounds that are similar in tone to the birds.

For birds flying against a clear sky, I often use a group of focus points (*right*). This works for me when there is nothing else in the frame for the focus to choose from, only the bird. With a group of focus points, usually a cluster around the centre, finding the bird is easier initially. The larger area covered by the group means that it is easier to keep at least one focus point on the bird as it flies past. I try to use an aperture small enough to give me plenty of depth of field. I do that in case the focus group locks onto a wing instead of the bird's head, giving me a greater chance to get everything in focus. ◆



You are welcome to e-mail your photographic queries to 'Talking Tech', editor@birdlife.org.za