

better & better

Zeiss SF 10x32 binoculars



One of the inherent hazards of reviewing birding products is that you run the risk of getting something you don't want to give back after the review. Almost 15 years ago I conducted a wide-ranging survey of binoculars that resulted in me switching to a pair of Zeiss Victory 10x32 binoculars. They have been my trusty birding companions ever since, performing flawlessly in all habitats from the tropics to Antarctica. The combination of brilliant optics in a compact, lightweight

and rugged package is unbeatable. Or so I thought, until I was asked to review the new Zeiss SF 32-millimetre range.

Zeiss brought out the open-hinge design SF range to rave reviews in 2016, but only in the larger 42-millimetre objective models. I read the reviews with interest, but my days of lugging around 'full-size' binoculars are long past. However, it was inevitable that a 32-millimetre range would follow, and when asked to give them a test drive I was eager to see what Zeiss had delivered.

On opening the box, the most striking difference from the old Victory 10x32 is that the SF is appreciably longer. It also weighs a little more (653 compared to 630 grams, including the comfortable padded neck strap and rain guard). Throw in a slightly less impressive close focus distance (nominally 1.95 metres) and you might be wondering why Zeiss bothered to replace the Victory. But once you pick up the SF you know why. These are quite simply the most ergonomically lovely binoculars I have ever used.

The pundits will tell you it's because the SF design packs most of the weight towards the eye-pieces. Maybe so. But what is indisputable is that they feel slimmer, lighter and are definitely more stable to hold than their predecessor. You can wear them all day without noticing they are there. They fit perfectly in your hands and the super-smooth, large focusing wheel is in exactly the right place. After using them for a few days I felt like the cliché of the midlife-crisis male – wanting to trade in my faithful companion of the past 15 years for a new, taller, slimmer model!

In an attempt to save my self-esteem (and bank balance) I polished up the old Victory and set about a more objective comparison. Optically, there's little to choose between the two. The fact that my much abused Victory could still compare favourably with a brand-new pair of binoculars is testament to the hard-wearing nature of Zeiss optics. To me, binoculars are very much working tools and I routinely clean them with my shirt (lens cloths seem to migrate to wherever I am not...)

Needless to say, both deliver bright, sharp images, even in fairly poor light conditions that might be challenging for the relatively small 32-millimetre objective lenses. I tested the SFs out at dawn

on a misty West Coast morning and could easily make out the heavy streaking on Karoo Larks displaying against the rising sun. The SF's image is slightly sharper right at the edge of the field of view than the Victory's, but I found the very edge of the field of view not entirely 'flat'. Initially that was somewhat distracting when panning rapidly, but this issue soon disappeared as I grew used to the new model.

The other concern people often raise about 32-millimetre binoculars is a narrow field of view. Here again Zeiss has more than delivered. The 10x32 boasts a field of view of 130 metres at 1000 metres, nominally the same as the old Victory, but it appears slightly wider. Suffice to say it is even wider than the SF 10x42 (120 metres) and appreciably wider than the other 'top end' models' 10x binoculars, irrespective of objective diameter.

Needless to say, Zeiss's SF range is fully waterproof and rated to work from -30 to 63 °C (handy for birding in a warming world). They have an excellent exit pupil distance (19 millimetres) that offers comfortable use for spectacle users.



The eyecups are similar to the Victory's, which have given hassle-free service for 15 years. If you care for these things, they come with a nylon carry case that looks about as functional as these things can be (mine lives in a drawer).

In conclusion, these binoculars probably are best avoided unless you have the wherewithal to buy a pair (at about

Despite the new Zeiss Victory SF 10x32 (left) being larger than its predecessor (right), it feels lighter and slimmer.

R40 000 they are not cheap) because they will give you a hankering for better things. I'm currently negotiating to keep the review pair...

PETER RYAN

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Swarovski NL Pure binoculars

Swarovski Optik has released a new flagship range of binoculars, NL Pure, which comprises three roof-prism models: 8x42, 10x42 and 12x42. From the very first time I lifted a pair to my eyes, it was apparent that a lot of thought and innovation had gone into them; it was, after all, no small undertaking to improve on the legendary EL range. With the NL Pure, an all-new design paired with an incredible field of view opens up a new dimension in bird viewing that I had thought simply wasn't possible. But having tested the NL 12x42 in often challenging field conditions while conducting intensive full-day bird surveys over three weeks, I was only too happy to be proved wrong.

One of the immediate differentiating attributes of the NL Pure is its intriguing shape, which is centred on a solid single hinge positioned towards the rear of the binoculars. To achieve the key design considerations of optimal ergonomics and weight distribution,

above and right *The slimmer, recessed barrels of the NL Pure house a revised prism layout, creating an ingenious balance and fit in the hand.*

Swarovski designers held extensive workshops with a physiotherapist and an osteopath. The result is slimmer, recessed barrels with a revised prism layout that improves the balance and creates a better fit in the hand when compared to the double hinge of the legendary EL model. The binoculars' contours conform to the user's natural grip, the uniquely shaped barrels ensuring that the hands remain relaxed while the binoculars' weight rests



mostly at the base of the thumb for greater comfort.

More innovation is evident in the repositioning and total redesign of the focus wheel. Now placed more intuitively for the index finger and with a separate dioptre, it enables users to latch onto birds with speed and accuracy, particularly when their quarry is very active in foliage or flying past. The focus wheel also operates very smoothly.

The field of view is the third element to see improvement – and it is quite incredible. At 6.5 degrees, the NL 12x42 has a wider field of view than the EL 10x42 (6.4 degrees), which is remarkable at such magnification. The jaw-dropping 9.1-degree and 7.6-degree fields of view of the NL 8x42 and NL 10x42 respectively are about 20 per cent greater than those of the EL 8x42 and EL 10x42. These are welcome gains, but not because the EL models have narrow views. For context, a field of view of 8–8.5 degrees is considered excellent in 8x42 binoculars, while in 10x42 models 6–6.5 degrees is good. The NL binoculars exceed these values by some margin; the 12x42 model I tried I can only describe as more immersive, with less of a 'tunnel' effect than traditional binoculars.

Birders always welcome a good field of view, as it makes it easier for them

to locate subjects while scanning wetlands or open grassland or when birding in a forest. My initial misgivings about the 12x magnification eased the more I used the binoculars and I enjoyed being able to see the birds in finer detail. If you have a steady hand, it is certainly worth considering the NL 12x42, especially as its optional new accessory, a forehead rest, improves stability, particularly during prolonged use. But all the models have their advantages: the NL 8x42 excels in low light conditions and the NL 10x42 is a superb all-rounder – both setting new benchmarks. The NL 12x42 is one of a kind, though, and is highly capable in various birding applications.

The NL models' image quality – intensity, sharpness and colour rendition – is also a cut above the rest; I found it easy to locate even cryptic species, while it was less challenging to clinch the identification of distant birds. At 91 per cent light transmission, this

MODEL	NL PURE 8x42	NL PURE 10x42	NL PURE 12x42
Angular field of view (°)	9.1	7.6	6.5
Linear field of view (m/m)	159/1000	133/1000	113/1000
Eye relief (mm)	18	18	18
Minimum focus distance (m)	2	2	2.6
Weight (grams)	840	850	840
Recommended retail price	R62 000	R64 000	R65 000

brilliant image quality is bright too, with edge-to-edge clarity.

Weight is no longer a consideration when choosing a preferred magnification, as both the 8x42 and 12x42 weigh in at 840 grams and the 10x42 at 850 grams. Minimum focus distance is two metres for the 8x42 and 10x42 and 2.6 metres for the 12x42.

The NL Pure 42s are incredible optics in the smallest size possible where ergonomics and handling are integral to the overall viewing experience. They were a pleasure to use and perhaps as near perfect as a pair of binoculars

can get. The suggested retail prices for the range are between R62 000 and R65 000, depending on magnification, and include a very comfortable neck strap, a rain-guard, objective lens covers, a carry bag, a cleaning cloth and a specially developed soap and soft brush for cleaning the exterior of the binoculars.

The EL range will remain in production, with Swarovski reducing the prices of EL 42 models, with certain design tweaks. All Swarovski binoculars come with an extensive 10-year warranty.

MARTIN BENADIE

Swarovski Optik dG

Technology has helped to shape our world into a bustling hive of information; no matter where we are, it forms an integral part of our day-to-day lives. It is at the core of much of what we now take for granted: instant tap-and-go payments, books available as apps, vehicles that drive themselves, the largest source of information on the planet at the fingertips of more than 40 per cent of the global population...

Even birding, as simple and effortless as it often is, has begun its own technological metamorphosis. No longer do we need to page through field guides, struggling to identify an unfamiliar species. All we have to do is take a photograph of the mystery bird with either a digital or a phone camera and place it on social media for assistance and comments from those who are more learned. Field guides don't have to be lugged around in our backpacks any

more, taking up space and adding to baggage weight. Instead, a few minutes spent browsing one of the two popular app stores will produce an app suitable for our chosen area of avian interest.

The next rung on the ladder of aviatechnological progression would surely have to do with optics – and who better to take this step than one of the world's leading optics brands, Austria-based Swarovski Optik? The rung comes in the form of Swarovski's Digital Guide, or dG for short, a 550-gram monocular device that makes use of both the company's renowned brilliance in optics products (such as the Swarovski CL Pocket 8x binoculars) and a built-in 13-megapixel snapshot camera for photographing the bird to be identified.

This advance was taken a step further when Swarovski teamed up with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in a partnership that enables photos taken by >



Ergonomically, the dG is comfortable to hold and remarkably light in weight.

the dG to be synced directly to a cell phone or tablet using the dG's Wi-Fi function and then uploaded onto the Merlin Bird ID app. This app itself has made revolutionary progress in making bird identification much easier by tapping into one of the world's largest avian observation databases and using expert algorithms to identify conclusively the photographed bird.

I have been extremely fortunate to have put the dG to the test in a number of different situations, habitats and conditions in South Africa over the past couple of months and I have been overwhelmingly impressed by the exceptional quality and attention to detail that are such familiar features of the Swarovski brand. Ergonomically, the device is comfortable to hold and the thumb moulds and light weight make for easy and stable use, while its all-round user friendliness render it appealing for birders of all ages. With the help of its built-in stabiliser and auto-focus feature, the camera produces an image quality that is perfect for record shots and certainly good enough to identify a bird. It doesn't aspire to the level required by a professional photographer, but that is not its aim – it merely captures enough detail to aid identification.



I have only two concerns relating to the dG and both are minor. The first is the absence of lens covers, which makes the lenses vulnerable to scratches, especially in the birding context where the device would see a lot of use and would often be grabbed urgently, leading to bumps and scratches. With this in mind, users would be well advised to handle the dG with extra care in order to maintain its condition. My second concern is that connection between the dG and another device – tablet or cell phone – is not instant and can take a couple of seconds longer than is ideal for identifying a bird about to fly. I would also advise that the dG is connected to the other device before taking photographs, as its storage capacity is limited to 10 images.

left Small in size and easy to carry at your side, the dG is a bold and exciting step away from the ordinary.

above The dG makes use of both a single 8x monocular lens, equivalent to that of the Swarovski CL Companion binoculars, and an in-built 13-megapixel snapshot camera.

So who will benefit most from the dG and is it a worthwhile product to invest in? As it's designed to identify bird species, birders whose identification skills range between intermediate and experienced will probably not need it – unless, of course, they are visiting regions where the birds are less familiar to them. By the same token, professional bird guides will probably not use it. But if you are just beginning to delve into the remarkable world of birds and would like some assistance in getting to grips with bird families instead of sifting through a field guide hoping to light upon the bird you just saw, this is the product for you. It is also a fantastic device for children who are drawn to the wonders of technology, adding a thrilling element to identifying birds that is likely to appeal to budding young birders.

With the dG, Swarovski Optik is taking a brave step away from the ordinary. It is going to be exciting to see how the brand develops the concept in the not-too-distant future.

The dG retails from R45 000.
TONI GEDDES

