

# all I want...

## Zeiss SFL binoculars

There was a time when, if someone asked which binoculars you used, you could say Leica or Swarovski or Zeiss and that would suffice. The 'big three' binocular manufacturers each had one model and the only decision was the magnification and the size of the objective lenses. No longer! Probably as a result of the increasing competition from other manufacturers and the eye-watering price of the top-end models, there has been increasing diversification in the ranges offered by the big three.

Until recently, Zeiss had three models: the top of the range Victory series, which retail for more than R40 000; the mid-range Conquest series (R16 000 to R22 000); and the less expensive Terra series (R8000 to R10 000). For birders, the choice within each was either 8x or 10x magnification and 32mm or 42mm objectives. I love my Victory SF 10x32 binoculars for their stunning ergonomics and great optics (see *African Birdlife* 9(1): 60-61), but they are out of the price range of most birders.

The Conquest 10x42 comfortably outstripped the competition in terms of value for money in this magazine's 2013 binocular review (*African Birdlife* 1(3): 48-52), scoring top marks for build quality and 'feel' and only narrowly missing out on the top spot for optics. They remain a solid option for birders. But Zeiss has now released another offering that combines the 'Special Focus' of the Victory SF series with an impressively 'Lightweight' design; hence the designation as Zeiss SFL.

So far, only two models have been released: 8x40 and 10x40. I got to field test a pair of 8x40 SFLs and I have to say I was impressed. As you'd expect from Zeiss, the optics are superb. The ultra-high-definition lenses deliver a bright

and crisp image that is even flatter than my Victory SF. And the 'Special Focus' is fast and precise, with a large, well-placed focus wheel that requires only 1.4 turns to focus from infinity down to 1.5 metres, ideal for observing insects and herps as well as birds.

But probably the main selling point is the light weight of the SFLs. By reverting to the once-standard 40mm objective lenses, Zeiss have managed to shave about 20 per cent off the mass of the SFLs, compared to most 42mm models. At 640 grams, they weigh only 10 grams more than the 32mm Conquests, and 40-50 grams more than the 32mm Victory range. There was no issue with wearing them for a protracted period – indeed, they felt remarkably similar to a 32mm model. And although I prefer the ergonomics of the open-hinge design of the Victory SF range, there's not much in it. The SFLs are amazingly compact, with a shorter length than my 32mm binoculars, and fit comfortably in the hand.

Seemingly, the lower mass has not sacrificed on ruggedness. The SFLs

feature the same water resistance (400 millibars) and temperature range (-30 to 63 degrees Celsius) as the Victory and Conquest ranges. Build quality is similar to the Conquest range, with the same dioptre adjustment wheel on the right eyepiece. I would have preferred a locking adjustment wheel, but I haven't experienced any issues with this shifting in either the Conquests or SFLs. They come with Zeiss's high-quality, broad neoprene neck strap, a rain guard and objective caps, and a soft case.

The SFLs are priced between the Conquest and Victory series, retailing for approximately R32 000. This is quite a jump from the Conquest range, but if you're looking for a compact, easy-to-wear pair of binoculars that will perform in gloomy forest interiors, the SFLs have no peer. It remains to be seen whether Zeiss will bring out a 30mm objective option to compete head to head with Swarovski's CL Companion range (see *African Birdlife* 6(3): 72-73).

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