

SPOTTING SCOPES FOR BIRDING

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A spotting scope can raise bird watching to new heights. It can really bring birds up close and personal so you can really see those distinctive identification features. But it can also be a waste of money depending on several factors.

So, I am listing the Pros and Cons of several things that come to mind from my decades of looking through and spending money on spotting scopes.

First a little lingo – scopes and binoculars are described by numbers describing their size and magnification – like 8 by 42. The 8 is the magnification (8 times larger than what you see) and 42 is the diameter in millimeters of the objective (front lens). The magnification is rather self-explanatory while the objective is important for two reasons: 1) the larger the size, the more light it lets in so it is easier to see in lower light; and, 2) the larger the size, the more field you can see so you can find your bird easier. But there are tradeoffs - larger is heavier. Quality varies a huge amount over the range of scopes, and you get what you pay for.

Just for comparison, binocs are generally about 6 to 12 power and the objective ranges from 30 to 50 mm. Scopes vary from 20 to 60 power in their magnification with the ability to bring distant birds or object up close, and with objectives ranging up to about 85 mm. The larger the numbers, the heavier the scope.

PROS for a scope

- Great for birds at a distance, if they are not moving much
- Great for such birds as shorebirds that float or just hang out
- Great for birds on a wire, in a nest, in a tree or on a pole
- Great at your home to get up close to things on your property like watching feeders or the ground.
- Great when there is lots of light

CONS for a scope

- Expensive
- Lugging it around is tough and does not give you a chance to easily use your binoculars or camera
- If birds are moving around quickly, it is nearly impossible to find and see them
- If they are flying, you can almost forget using the scope
- A scope really requires a tripod although some folks can use something like a gun stock but I know it does not work well, I made one

THE SCOPE

It is impossible to make a suggestion as to what to buy when I don't know a person's budget because options and quality vary so much by price. I don't know a person's

budget, but I will say that with the a decent mid-level scope and great tripod, will probably cost \$1000 - about \$1,200. This will get you a great setup (Vortex Optics Viper with a Manfrotto tripod with a joystick grip ball head) . If that is out of your price range, go for better binoculars that you can afford. A scope and binoculars can last forever – I have a compact pair of Zeiss binoculars that are over 50 years old and a scope that is about 45 years old and they still serve me well.. The scope I just passed down to my son and my 4-year-old granddaughter is using it too.

My Thoughts

- You do get what you pay for
- Cheaper ones are no better than binoculars
- The larger the objective lens (the front lens) the better light gathering and better scope but heavier
- Zooms are better than fixed single magnification because it makes it easier to find the bird then enlarge the image once you find it
- Angled eye pieces are easier to look though but you can get use to either and be fine
- You can spend as little as \$120 up to over \$3,000 for a scope but you don't need to spend \$3,000 for a good product, but the cheapest ones are not worth buying
- Do not skimp on a tripod – it has got to be real stable to use in the field
- The tripod grip-head is important and the joystick ball head is great for birding as you can maneuver it all around which you cannot easily do with a stick head like on many camera tripods

Finally, as you research your options and prices, The National Audubon Society has a nice site for comparing and learning about scopes at ...www.audubon.org/scope-guide

Some comparisons of scopes which get the best reviews:

Least expensive

Celestron Trailseeker 65. Costs about \$260 and weighs 3 lbs
Has 16-48x magnification with 65 mm objective lens

Medium

Celestron Regal M2. Costs about \$750 and weighs 5 lbs
20-60x magnification; 80mm objective lens; weighs 5 lbs

or

Vortex Optics Viper HD. Costs about \$650 and weighs 4 lbs
15-45x magnification; 65mm objective lens

Expensive but super

Kowa TSN-883 \$3,300+ with eyepiece
25-60x magnification; 88mm objective lens

or

Kowa TSN-773. Costs about \$2,500 with eyepiece
25-60x magnification; 77 mm objective lens

Enjoy! I hope to see you out in the field one day soon scoping some fabulous birds!