

# EXPERT REVIEWS

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## Entry-level contender

Are the latest binoculars from Helios the firm's best addition to the budget market? **Mike Alibone** finds out when he tests a new model from the Mistral WP6 range.

### REVIEW

#### Helios Mistral WP6 8x42 binocular

**DESPITE** having had a place in the market for almost 50 years, British brand Helios continues to remain somewhat low profile – it's a name not frequently mentioned in conversations about optics. The company's binoculars fall into the entry-level category, ranging in price from £50 to £280. Back in 2012 I reviewed the Nirvana-ED 8x42 (*Birdwatch* 239: 61), an extremely good-value model which sits at the top of this price range and is still available today.

The most recent addition to the line-up is the Mistral WP6, of which there are 10 models across the popular objective diameters of 32 mm, 42 mm and 50 mm, some of which feature ED glass. I tested the 8x42, which doesn't feature ED glass and retails at £110 (the more expensive 8x42ED does have ED glass).

The 8x42 is a basic birding binocular of thoroughly sound construction and admirable quality. The model sports adequate protection in the form of smooth, green body armour over a lightweight polycarbonate body, fashionably contoured and featuring shallow cutaways for the user's thumbs to facilitate comfortable holding. The comfort factor could, however, be increased slightly more if the

strap lugs were positioned a few millimetres closer to the eyecups, as they tend to intrude by digging into the hands a little when using the focus wheel.

While the wheel itself is one of the smoothest turning I have ever encountered, it takes two full anti-clockwise rotations to move between close focus and infinity, so it's not the fastest if you need to quickly switch between the two extremes. However, adjusting the focus between approximately 10 m and 800 m can be achieved in just one quarter of a turn, which is perfectly satisfactory during the normal course of observation. I measured the close-focus distance at 2.6 m. The metal wheel, little more than a finger's width, is finely and closely stippled and operates well with gloved hands.

The dioptre, mounted on the right ocular, has a stippled rubber covering which provides plenty of grip when operated and, although arguably it turns a little too freely, it did not become dislodged from its setting during use in the field. Twist-out eyecups click-stop in two extended positions above the base setting and they are wrapped in soft rubber, which is comfortable against the eye, and enable visibility of the full field of view when fully extended.

Considering this could be

classed as a 'budget' binocular without ED glass, it does feature silver-coated BAK-4 prisms and fully multi-coated optics, and the

image reaches a surprising level of quality. The field of view is generous, chromatic aberration is pegged at a relatively low degree



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#### THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



**DOMINIC MITCHELL** is *Birdwatch's* founder and Managing Editor. He has been birding in Britain and abroad for more than 40 years.



**REBECCA ARMSTRONG** is *Birdwatch's* Assistant Editor. She has now been birding for more than eight years.



**MIKE ALIBONE** is *Birdwatch's* Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than a decade.



**DAVID CALLAHAN** Prior to joining *Birdwatch*, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



**STEVE YOUNG** is Photographic Consultant for *Birdwatch* and an award-winning wildlife photographer.



**ROB HUME** began watching birds as a child. He worked for the RSPB for many years and has written several books.

and curvature of field is nominal.

The image is sharp, with only a modicum of softening at the edges, but I would describe it as average in terms of brightness. However, depending on your point of view, this could be interpreted as simply being richer with a considerable depth of colour. This was most evident when viewing swathes of different habitat with, for instance, beds of *Phragmites* appearing somewhat warm-toned rather than light straw, while grass presented as deep and generously lush. At the same time my local Siskins were vivid and alive and the Mealy Redpoll which visited my garden feeders throughout the winter appeared anything but dull through this binocular.

For the price, the Mistral is conservatively good value. It comes with a soft carry case, an articulated rainguard and tethered objective lens covers, which I thought were far too loosely fitting, although they did not fall off during use. The neckstrap is a basic lanyard, broadening around the area in contact with the neck and without padding, but adding your own is always an option. ■

#### Further info

- Price: £110
- Size: 145x130 mm
- Weight: 682 g
- Field of view: 129 m at 1,000 m
- Light transmission: 85 per cent
- Close focus: 2 m
- Gas-filled: yes
- Waterproof: yes
- Guarantee: 5 years

#### Verdict

- ✓ Image is sharp with only a little softening at the edges
- ✓ Curvature of field is nominal
- ✗ Image is only average in terms of brightness

## Micro machines

Is small really beautiful? **Mike Alibone** evaluates the world's first 'micro' spotting scope from Celestron.

### REVIEW

#### Celestron Hummingbird 9-27x56 ED spotting scope

**CAN** a spotting scope get any smaller? When I visited Celestron back in March and Dave Murray pulled out the two new Hummingbird models from the top drawer of his office desk – the one normally reserved for pens and small miscellaneous items – I was amazed at how tiny they were.

Dubbed by the manufacturer as 'the world's first micro spotting scope', Celestron's diminutive Hummingbird series comprises two angle-bodied models with 50 mm and 56 mm objectives delivering zoom magnification ranges of 7-22x and 9-27x respectively. The series' name was chosen to reflect some of a hummingbird's famous characteristics: very small size combined with high mobility and the capability of long-distance travel.

It's the last of these three attributes that Celestron had foremost in mind when designing these tiny scopes, which look set to take the 'travelscope' concept to a new dimension. I can vouch for the portability aspect as I took the larger of the two models to Israel in March to test alongside my 'regular' birding optics. The 27x top magnification is not the 60x that birding sometimes calls for, but the Hummingbird still worked pretty



well and generated both curiosity and genuine interest among contestants in the Champions of the Flyway bird race, who were gathered at Eilat's North Beach on presentation day.

To lighten the load, deliver compactness and reduce cost, the generally accepted practice for the manufacture of small lightweight optics is to skimp on functionality and, to a certain extent, this is true with the Hummingbird. There is, for example, no lens hood and no rotating tripod foot in either model, but the absence of these two features is relatively unimportant in the grand scheme of things and it's more than made up for by the inclusion of ED glass, full multi-coating and a fully waterproof, nitrogen-filled body.

This last is manufactured from tough polycarbonate and wrapped in a thin layer of rubber which, enhancing the aesthetics, has a slightly raised, non-slip textured area to the body's underside.

With the objective more than adequately recessed to protect it from damage, along with the integrated helical focusing ring, this scope has the look and feel of a quality product.

There is a single zoom eyepiece which fits both this model and the even smaller 50 mm version, in which it produces the lower magnification range of 7-22x. The eyepiece is simply inserted into the body and locked in position by turning a ring at

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