

HELIOS ULTRASPORT 8x42

Matt Merritt finds out that an old favourite is still turning out great optics at an incredible price

Looking back through the *Bird Watching* archives doing some research for another feature in this issue, I noticed that the name Helios popped up a lot in binocular reviews from the late '80s and early '90s.

When I thought about it, I started to remember them too. Solidly-built, optically impressive porro prisms, at an affordable price. Our reviewers at that time thought much the same, too.

They have a wide range of models on offer these days, both porro and roof prisms, so does the Helios name still guarantee good quality optics?

Well, the first thing to say about the Ultrasports is just how snugly they fit in the hand – they're pretty compact for 8x42s, they feel light (and they are, at 646g) and thoroughly well balanced, and they've got a neat, unfussy open bridge design, meaning that you barely notice that you've got them with you. Not that they're not robust, though – they're waterproof and fog-free, and very solidly put together.

Put a favourite strap on them – the fairly narrow neoprene one supplied is good but not great – and they're even more comfortable to use.

The image is sharp, bright, and boasts a very natural colour tone, and even in woodland, rain and mist, or on a couple of early starts, they coped well. The arrival of ED glass at affordable prices has revolutionised optics, but it's good to see that even non-ED models like this can perform well in low light, courtesy of multiple lens coatings.

What's most outstanding for binoculars costing less than £150 is the lack of edge softness – you get full value for almost all of the 129m@1,000m field of view. There is a little there if you really go looking for it, but in normal use, there was nothing at all intrusive.

Going back to that field of view, it felt more



FACTFILE

Field of view: 129m@1,000m
Close focus: 2.5m
Dimensions: 148 x 124 x 50mm
Weight: 646g
Price: £129
Contact: Optical Vision Ltd, Unit 3, Woolpit Business Park, Woolpit, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk IP30 9UP

than adequate in all situations, and helped make prolonged use both comfortable and rewarding.

I did find a little bit of colour fringing when viewing against bright sunlight, but really not that much.

Focusing was precise and easy, thanks to a good, chunky focus wheel (almost two fingers wide), which takes 1.25 anti-clockwise turns from close focus to infinity, travelling satisfyingly smoothly and only moderately stiffly.

Close focus is around 2.5m, or maybe a little closer – nothing special these days, but not at all bad, either.

There's a maximum 18mm of eye relief, and the well-moulded rubber-covered twist-up eyecups have four positions. I did wonder if they'd stay at the two intermediate positions very well in extended use – they didn't feel particularly well defined – so you'd need to check this carefully to suit your needs, but the fully extended position proved to be both comfortable and effective.

The dioptre adjustment is made by pulling out and turning the focus wheel, and it set easily and accurately, as well as staying in place in the field without any trouble.

I've already mentioned the strap, and there are tethered objective lens covers and a slightly loose rainguard, as well as a perfectly functional fabric carrying case.

All things considered, it's hard not to be really impressed. Beginners are bound to be interested in them, given how much they manage to pack into a £130 package, but you can imagine anyone in the market for a second pair of bins also taking a close look.

We'll be taking a look at Helios's ED models at a later date, but this time we also took a look at the cheaper Mistral WP4...

First week with Helios Ultrasport 8x42

