

BOOK REVIEW: *OUTDOOR OPTICS*

by Robert Manns

Outdoor Optics by Leif J. Robinson, published by Lyons and Burford, New York, 1990; 146 pages; black and white photographs and illustrations; \$13.95 (soft cover).

This is truly a book for birders who want some background about binoculars. It is the book buyers need to read to avoid making costly mistakes. Although it is not written in the most scintillating scientific prose, although its cover features an archaic instrument used some twenty-five years ago, although the author hard sells a maker who does not make one blessed binocular for wildlife observation (Steiner), although the author's Table A on page 49 in which he attempts to come forward with some direct comparisons is maddeningly sketchy and arbitrary, and although there is no mention anywhere of the difference in equal power sizes between roof prism and Porro prism binoculars, this is the best book of its kind known to this reader.

Robinson's brief and effective dismissal of zoom binoculars as "curious devices" should put the reader's curiosity about them to bed permanently. In Chapter 4 he neatly describes the basic differences between roof and Porro design without teasing the reader into optical physics. The chapter is written by a man who knows far more about optics theoretically than he needs to divulge in the name of histrionics, and this is a great saving in reader time. However, it is this reviewer's opinion that Robinson is overly generous in reviewing the fast-focus rocker arm of some Bushnell models. The method is fast, certainly, but too fast and too critical. It is equally quick out of focus, making the focus band too narrow and only gradually available to the eye.

The authority of the book is briefly uneven when the author, for some odd reason, allows to the reader that his choices of binoculars were guided by the New Jersey Audubon Society review of 1984 and a Consumer's Union report in 1989. Why does an authority depend on them at all? Why not do his own homework? Of course, the answer may be: Where does he get all the binoculars for doing a direct comparison? And that is a consideration.

Excellent treatment is given to eye relief in the binocular. This is where a buyer can really bury himself. Example: Man goes into a camera store wearing eyeglasses. The clerk hands him a Bausch and Lomb Discoverer 9 x 35 and kindly turns back the rubber eyecups. Neat. The buyer is seeing something, possibly for the first time, at nine-power magnification. The view is all grandeur. Wrap it up. Down the tube go three or four hundred dollars. The seven or eight millimeters of eye relief are nowhere near the seventeen millimeters

necessary.

However, best of all, if briefly covered, are some notes on contrast and what it means to the total picture. Photographs amplify the notes.

The chapter on spotting scopes is full of fine information (I say this guardedly), e.g., the ability of seventy- and eighty-millimeter-aperture scopes to gather more "thermals" than a sixty. But as the author admits, you cannot argue with the success of Questar and Kowa. The Japanese have stated their case for fluorite through two manufacturers, Kowa and Takahashi. For the present they work. But fluorite lenses also have a reputation among some physicists for instability, and if that is the case, they may not be the only solution to aberration in refractors. We seem to be waiting, and the Germans seem to be waiting.

Robinson's Table B on page 91 compares "Five Exceptional Spotting Scopes," two of which I feel might be completely expendable and another in grave doubt. But the reader must understand that getting two experienced optical people to agree on optics is like getting two poets to agree on what they like in verse. Talk about your hard-hitting play-offs.

The chapter on spotting-scope supports favors the wobbliest, lightest, almost-not-there, and, fortunately, long-gone flip-lock tripod. But what did I just tell you about poets? And I also have no use for shoulder mounts and monopods for scopes, since neither one attributes any steadiness to the image in powers over fifteen.

Lastly, the closing chapters of the book on Cleanliness and Care (of optics), Tips for Testing Equipment, and Little Things (covering straps, harnesses, and truly little things) are certainly going to be helpful not only to the buyer but to the user as well. With these chapters, I am in agreement, at least sixty percent.

Anyone wanting to feel that an eventual binocular or scope purchase resulted from some understanding of the basics of optical design and craft will have begged, bought, or stolen a copy of Robinson's *Outdoor Optics* and will have read it.

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