

Jewels in the crown

Review: Hawke Sapphire ED 8x42 and 8x43 binoculars

CROSSING THE BUDGET line, Hawke has now launched a new flagship range of binoculars set to challenge the established mid-field players in the optics market. The Sapphire ED series is represented by 8x and 10x magnification models and offers users the choice between 43 mm objective open-bridge and 42 mm traditional top-hinge designs; 25 mm compacts also form part of the range.

I wanted to compare and contrast the two 8x magnification models, so I treated myself to a visit to north Norfolk, where there were some classy birds on offer ...

While Cley's Western Sandpiper would have looked great at close quarters through just about anything, I was immediately struck by the sharpness and clarity of the image returned by the open-bridge model – and I'm not just referring to the bird. The general surrounds of the wetland habitat, alive with wildfowl and waders, were also vibrant in the image, with levels of brightness and contrast which I felt were well on their way to rivalling top-tier binoculars. This appeared to be repeated with the 42 mm model further down the coast, when I picked up a distantly flying Rough-legged Buzzard that was readily identifiable at very long range with the same degrees of clarity, sharpness and colour contrast as I found in the larger model.

Hawke has clearly upped its game with the introduction of the Sapphires, which have a similar specification to the hitherto most expensive equivalent Hawke model, the 8x43 Frontier ED, but which carry a price tag of just over £100 more. The main optical

differences see the Sapphires with dielectric prism coatings, which gives them an extra degree of brightness, and their lens coatings throughout

are also different. Cosmetically, the Sapphires have a more tactile rubber armouring and, for increased user comfort, angled neoprene lanyards.

There are, of course, some differences between the open-bridge and top-hinge Sapphires themselves, but they do share many common features. Both have magnesium alloy housings incorporating contoured rubber cutaways (or thumb-rests), the rubber-covered eyecups twist out and click-stop in three positions and there are optional clip-in tethered objective lens covers.

Each has the dioptre built into the right ocular and a milled central focusing wheel, approximately two fingers wide, although that of the 43 mm model is slightly deeper and I found it turned a little more smoothly than that of the smaller model. Both operated well with gloves. The 43 mm model took approximately 1.7 rotations to move between close focus and infinity, while this was slightly less at 1.5-1.6 in the smaller model.

Though the models are calibrated at 2 m, I measured the close focus distance at 1.8 m for both. The field of view, at 142 m at 1,000 m for both, is impressive. Water-repellent coatings are used on the objective lenses.

Tech spec

	8x42	8x43
Price:		
Size:	138x128 mm	166x128 mm
Weight:	730 g	758 g
Field of view:	142 m at 1,000 m	142 m at 1,000 m
Close focus:	2 m	2 m
Gas-filled:	yes	yes
Waterproof:	yes	yes
Guarantee:	10 years	10 years

I found the physical differences to be more marked. The open-bridge binocular is 28 mm longer and the optical system is slightly different, meaning it weighs some 28 g more. However, the extra length allows more space for better positioning of the strap lugs, making the binocular more comfortable to hold for some users. Arguably, the top hinge fits better in smaller hands.

In terms of image quality, the generally low level of chromatic aberration appears the same in both models, although it is still present in the centre of both images if you look for it. The rich, natural colours are overlaid with a cold, bluish cast and, to add to comments already made about sharpness, there is some softening in the peripheral 10 per cent of the field.

To sum up, I was impressed with the performance of both these sub-£500 binoculars, which I believe are the best Hawke has launched to date. I preferred using the open-bridge model, as it appeared to handle better and was more comfortable (for my hands); I couldn't help feeling there was just a little something 'extra' in the image, although it wasn't something I could precisely pinpoint!

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