



HERE'S LOOKING *At You*

A beginning birder's guide to binoculars helps take the guesswork out of finding the best optics.

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Blue Jays, cardinals, and goldfinches are all gimmes in my backyard; I recognize them immediately. Confusion sets in when a bird lands on the feeder and is gone before I can open my favorite bird field guide. Was the chest colored red or raspberry? Did it have an eye stripe?

Trying to identify birds at the backyard feeder is nearly impossible without a decent pair of binoculars, also called optics. Binoculars bring a bird closer and narrow your focus so you can pick out the features you need to see in order to determine what kind of bird it is.

But how do you know what kind of binoculars to purchase? Even if you narrow your search to just bird-watching binoculars, there are hundreds to choose from, ranging in cost from less than \$25 to a few thousand dollars. I decided I needed to do some research in an effort to find the perfect pair of binoculars. Here's what I found.

Budget

As a beginning birder, I did not want to spend more than \$200. There were plenty of decent optics that cost less, and, I figured, I can always upgrade later, especially if I find my hobby becoming a passion.

Know Your Numbers

Binoculars are described using two numbers, such as 7x35 or 8x40. The first number is the magnification, or power, which means how many times closer the bird will appear than if you looked at it without binoculars. A magnification of 7 or 8 is recommended for beginners. Some people may suggest a 10, which offers slightly more detail, but binoculars with that magnification have to be held steady and that's sometimes hard to do.

The second number refers to the diameter, in millimeters, of the binocular's large lenses, also called the objective lenses. The larger the lens size, the greater the field of view, which is what you actually see when looking through the binoculars. For good image quality and brightness, you need a 30- to 42-millimeter diameter. Lower numbers—20 to 25 millimeters—are considered compact binoculars.

Prism Factor

All binoculars have internal prisms, which allow the viewer to see objects right side up rather than upside down. There are two types of prisms: roof and porro. In roof prism binoculars, the prisms are arranged so the objective lenses line up with the eyepieces, resulting in a sleek barrel shape. In porro prism binoculars, the prisms are arranged so the objective lenses are offset from the eyepieces, resulting in a zigzag shape. Try both and decide which feels better.

Close Up

As a backyard birder, it's important to have a pair of binoculars with a close focus (15 feet or less). Without close focus, you'll never be able to identify the birds at the feeder or birdbath. Some binoculars come with a close focus of 6 feet, ideal if your bird feeder is hanging outside a kitchen or living room window.

Try Me

Test the binoculars in the store by focusing on something you know. I tested 15 different binoculars. It's important to find a pair of optics that feels good in your hands and gives you bright, crisp images. 🌿

What does that mean?

- **Center Focus:** A single central focus system rather than individual eyepiece focus.
- **Compact:** Small, lightweight binoculars, such as 8x25.
- **Eye Relief:** The distance from your eye to the eyepiece. If you wear eyeglasses, plan on purchasing binoculars with an eye relief of at least 14 millimeters; this ensures you will see the whole field of view, rather than only a small portion.
- **Field of View:** The width of what you can see from 1,000 yards, expressed in feet. Remember, the greater the magnification, the smaller the field of view.
- **Magnification:** How many times closer the bird will appear than if you looked at it without binoculars; it is the first number in a binocular description (7x35).
- **Objective Size:** The diameter, in millimeters, of the binocular's objective (large) lenses; it is the second number in a binocular description (7x35).
- **Speed of Focus:** How long it takes to adjust the focus wheel; the quicker the better.
- **Weight:** For all-day birding your arms and neck will appreciate binoculars that weigh 17–22 ounces. If you plan to be out for a few hours or less, heavier binoculars are manageable.



Good

Vortex Crossfire

The porro prism Crossfire delivers bright, crisp images. The optics are shielded from water, making them waterproof and fogproof, even in the worst weather conditions. \$179.95. Vortex Optics; vortexoptics.com

Better

Eagle Optics Denali

Distinguish color and contrast—down to the smallest detail—with these midsize, roof prism binoculars. Backyard birders will appreciate a close focus of 10 feet. \$149.95. Eagle Optics; eagleoptics.com



Best

Swift Reliant #744

A quality product with dependable results at an affordable price, Swift Reliant binoculars have it all! These roof prism binoculars deliver a close focus of 6½ feet. \$149.95. Swift Sport Optics; swift-sportoptics.com