

Feature

Optical challenge

Sophia Gallia asks some keepers what they look for when buying telescopic sights and binoculars.

THE WORLD OF OPTICS FOR GAME MANAGERS is a complicated one. We do not attempt here to provide a definitive guide to buying, but merely to point out what things to look for and to provide some suggestions from your co-members. Before thinking about what to buy, be very clear about how, where and when you are going to use your optics.

PURPOSE

All of the gamekeepers we asked use telescopic sights (rifle scopes) and binoculars. Some of them also occasionally use spotting scopes. Their rifle scopes are used mainly for deer and fox control and their binoculars for the same, plus a bit of bird watching and poacher spotting. George Wallace, NGO firearms adviser, probably has the broadest range of uses: “As well as deer and pest control, I also use my optics for hunting abroad, testing my own and other people’s rifles and hand-loaded ammo on the rifle range,

and for test and review of rifles sent to me by importers and dealers.” NGO Deer Branch chairman, Dave Whitby says: “I also use night vision optics for poachers – when they work!”

Liam Bell says: “The main purpose of the telescopic sights is to ensure accurate bullet placement and, for binoculars, general observation of anything from small birds 50 feet away to suspicious vehicles a mile or more distant.”

CLARITY

With all optics, the focus should be sharp right across the field of view and remain sharp as the binoculars or scope are panned from side to side while scanning the countryside. “If it’s not sharp,” says George, “prolonged use will make you feel sick and damage your eyes.” Liam agrees: “Look for clarity.”

30MM VERSUS 1”

“Don’t be bamboozled by 30mm tubes,”

warns George. “They offer no advantage whatever but do increase bulk and the distance between the line of bore and the line of sight through the scope.” Others are keener on them: “The selling point for 30mm tubes is that the crosshairs move independently, making them more precise on adjustment,” explains Michael Dickinson, a self-employed stalker in the Midlands. Others say 30mm tubes are more durable, but in general most agree that size, in this case, doesn’t matter.

OBJECTIVE LENS SIZE

George warns against going for huge objective lenses on scopes for the same reason. He explains: “They allow a little more light to pass to the eye, but they prevent the scope being mounted low. They rarely show any advantage to the user of sporting rifles unless you habitually shoot in very low light and don’t use a lamp.”

With binoculars the second number

A Zeiss telescopic sight, mounted on a rifle.



Feature

ZEISS



These Zeiss binoculars are just the job for stalking.

(eg. 7x35) refers to the objective lens size in millimetres. The higher the number, the more light enters the lens and is transmitted to your eye, which is important if your main use is in low light conditions. When you do a lot of work at dawn or dusk, 8x56 will be hard to beat for light-gathering ability. But the bigger objective lens adds weight.

Most of the keepers we talked to cite light gathering ability as a main selection criterion for both scopes and binoculars, but with the advent of high speed lens coatings, the objective lenses can be smaller and still transmit adequate light.

MAGNIFICATION, ZOOM OR FIXED?

“Variable power scopes are a matter of choice,” says George. “But in my experience most people who have them leave them set on 6x magnification.” He suggests checking that neither the point of zero or the focus changes as you alter the magnification. “I know a fox looks much bigger with a 12x or 20x scope, but few of us could kill him reliably at that range, and a missed fox is a much wiser fox.” Michael also prefers fixed magnification: “With variable, it’s complicated to work out the range.” NGO chairman, Lindsay Waddell likes a high magnification scope: “I find it helps seeing detail, hence my 8x56 fixed Karl Kahles scope

on my .243.” Alan Newman, another Deer Branch committee member echoes Lindsay, saying: “My eyes are not what they were once, which is why all my scopes are variable.”

For stalking, the lower power binoculars are popular, indeed 7x or 8x were the most mentioned by our members. 7x35 is a good all-rounder. Smaller 8x30s offer a compromise between size and weight. In open country, where your quarry could be far away during the stalk, 9x35 or 10x42 may be ideal. If you’re stalking in woodland, however, a more compact pair may be preferable, for example 8x22, which will be adequate for assessing deer at up to 200 yards.

UP TO THE JOB

Our keepers all looked for robust scopes that are tough enough for the inevitable crawling around, but also ones that are lightweight. “I would look for a scope with a steel tube,” says Michael. “It’s stronger than aluminium and the strength outweighs the additional weight.”

For binoculars weight is an important factor. Steve Wright (Deer Branch committee) says: “They should come to hand easily, for example from hanging around your neck to moving up to your eyes, sometimes one-handed.”

HOW MUCH TO SPEND?

“Buy the best you can afford; they are a lifetime investment,” says Steve. George agrees: “Scopes and binoculars from the famous makers are things of beauty and a joy forever. You will never regret spending the money.” Lindsay echoes that feeling: “There is no substitute for quality.” Alan explains further: “With scopes you get what you pay for and I would sooner pay for a cheaper rifle and the most expensive mount rings and scopes I can afford.” Felix Bihlmeier, another regular stalker, says “You need to spend in the region of £1,000 retail for scopes or binoculars.”

WHAT MAKES?

Time and again, our keepers and stalkers recommended German and Austrian brands. “I bought a Zeiss 30 years ago and it’s been used ever since and never let me down,” says Michael. Felix agreed: “I use Swarovski, Zeiss, and Schmidt & Bender.” Others mentioned Pecar, Karl Kahles and “a cheap Chinese brand”. So there are lots to choose from.

DON'T FORGET THE MOUNTS

“Good scope mounts are most important,” says George. “Cheap ones are a disappointment waiting to happen.” He also stresses the importance of correct fitting and, if you are not confident about doing it yourself, make sure you get someone who really can, not just anyone who claims to be an expert. “Go for a good, sturdy mount,” suggested Michael, “I would also choose steel for this.”

WHERE TO BUY

If you’re buying new go to your local gun retailer for the scopes or good camera/optics shop for binoculars and spotting scopes. There are some good web outlets as well. There also seems to be a healthy second-hand market.

FURTHER ADVICE AND FINAL TIPS

A number of web-based articles help on the technicalities of what to look for when buying scopes and binoculars. Try searching for ‘hunting optics’.

- Know what you want.
- Learn features and terminology.
- Decide how much you can afford to spend.
- Be ready, willing and able to explain exactly what you need.