

Mini scopes

Need heavyweight performance without the bulk? We checked out seven travel scopes...

MOST birders nowadays, from beginners to experts, use a telescope for at least some of their birding, and improvements in optical technology mean that smaller and smaller scopes can do a job that would once have taken a much bulkier and heavier piece of kit.

Mini scopes, travel scopes, baby scopes – call them what you will – offer lightness and stowability, and are attractive not just to anyone who doesn't want to haul a heavier piece of equipment round their patch all day, but also to any birder who does a lot of travelling, especially abroad, as they easily slip into suitcases, flight bags or even pockets.

We tested seven scopes from five manufacturers, covering a wide price range, and offer a guide to the performance of all. In the end, though, there's no substitute for trying them out thoroughly yourself before you buy. Every birder's preferences will be different, based on factors as diverse as the sort of birdwatching

they do, their eyesight and physique, the scopes they're used to, and of course their budget, and all the scopes in the test had something to commend them to you. With that in mind, we offer a guide to the features we looked at and that you should test.

For our test, we asked manufacturers for examples of their sub-60mm objective lens scopes, plus a wide angle eyepiece if possible. Three were supplied with zoom eyepieces only.

All were tested alongside each other at the Anglian Water Birdwatching Centre, Rutland Water, on a single day in September. A resolution chart provided by Minox was used. Weights and lengths are as measured by our testers – other figures quoted in the fact-boxes are those supplied by manufacturers.

■ **THE TESTERS:** Author and optics expert David Chandler (DC); *Bird Watching* features editor Matt Merritt (MM).

What should I test a scope for?

HERE are the optical criteria we tested each of the scopes on – you should be looking at all these when buying. While

optical quality is always likely to be a high priority, remember that you need to settle on a scope that is also easy and pleasurable to use.

- **Field of view:** The wider the field, the easier you'll find it to observe flocks of birds, or birds in flight. It is best tested by focusing on a man-made object, where the relative width of field of different scopes can be measured.
- **Resolution:** Focus each scope on the same object – a particular part of a bird, or a branch, maybe – and look at the difference in detail. If possible, test this in low light and deep shade, to separate the very best from the rest. We used a resolution chart, but placed emphasis on in-the-field testing.
- **Brightness:** A smaller scope suffers by comparison with a large one in poor light, but factors such as the type of glass used also make a big difference.
- **Colour cast:** This is not a fault – some models will have a slight blue or yellow tinge to the image. The former produces a brighter, cleaner image, with slightly reduced contrast, while the latter produces better contrast but slightly reduced colour.
- **Colour fringing:** This is the appearance of a faint blue or yellow 'halo' around the object you are viewing, best tested by viewing a dark object against a pale background. All scopes are likely to suffer from it at least a little, especially towards the edge of images, but you only need to worry if it becomes distracting.
- For more tips on testing and buying scopes, go to: www.birdwatchingmag.blogspot.com

Opticron Mighty Midget ED52 v2 with wide HDFT 24x eyepiece

Weight: 492g (756g with eyepiece) **Length:** 260mm with eyepiece and extended
Objective: 52mm **Field of view:** 49m @ 1,000m **Close focus:** 6m
£191-eyepiece (£144); also available as straight scope; www.opticron.co.uk

OPTICS

THE image was bright, although not quite as bright or natural as the Nikon. The view was comfortable, despite a bit of edge softness, and contrast excellent. In the field, the image was very sharp (this was backed up by the resolution chart), and that edge softness was never distracting. Colour fringing was not really noticeable – there was a little depending on eye position (so take care), but even then only at the edge of the field. There was a slightly blue cast. Field of view was similar to the Nikon. Close focus was around 4.5m – perfectly respectable. It did well viewing against a bright sun.

DESIGN, MECHANICS & EASE OF USE

LIGHT, and, thanks to its design, packs away very small. It doesn't feel quite as well made as the Nikon, but the build quality is very good. It isn't armoured and there's no rotating collar, but there's a lens hood. Focus precision was very good – easier to find than on the Nikon. The focus wheel, on the right-hand top, is one finger wide, and takes 4.75 clockwise turns from close focus to infinity. It's very smooth, and is a bit stiffer than the Nikon. The screw-in eyepiece has a rubber-covered, two-position twist-up, twist-down eyecup. It has an objective lens cover and eyepiece lens cap.



HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

DC: THE view was very good and the telescopic design does reduce the size. This was a great opportunity to do a side-by-side comparison of ED and non-ED glass, and even though it was a bright day, I thought the ED view was better. It was 'cleaner', and more relaxing – if I were buying, I would seriously consider it. Well

done Opticron.

MM: THE image is clean, natural and wider than most in its class. Best of all is that it's not merely a scaled-down version of a bigger scope – it's beautifully designed as a travel scope, and you can imagine yourself slipping it into a roomy coat pocket for a flight.

OPTICS 8.5

DESIGN ETC 8.5

VALUE FOR MONEY 9

Opticron Mighty Midget 52 v2 with wide HDFT 24x eyepiece

Weight: 492g (756g with eyepiece) **Length:** 260mm with eyepiece and extended
Objective: 52mm **Field of view:** 49m @ 1,000m **Close focus:** 6m
£118-eyepiece (£144); also available as straight scope; www.opticron.co.uk

OPTICS

THE immediate impression of image quality was very good, with good sharpness at all distances, but some softness towards the edges. Resolution was good on the chart. Brightness and contrast were both good, but a little behind the ED and a little again behind the Nikon. Colour fringing was more noticeable than on the Nikon or MM ED, but could be mostly corrected by eye position (take care with this to get the best out of this scope). There was a slightly blue colour cast. Field of view was the very similar to the Nikon and the MM ED. Close focus was around 4.5m, again the same as the ED MM.

DESIGN, MECHANICS & EASE OF USE

LIGHT, and packs away very small. It doesn't feel as well made as the Nikon, but the build quality is still very good. It isn't armoured and there's no rotating collar, but there is a lens hood. Focus precision is good, with quite a fine touch. The focus wheel, on the right-hand top of the scope, is one finger wide, and takes 4.25 clockwise turns from close focus to infinity. It travels very smoothly, and is a bit stiffer than the Nikon. The screw-in eyepiece has a rubber-covered, two-position twist-up, twist-down eyecup, which is comfortable. It comes with an objective lens cover and an eyepiece lens cap.



GREAT VALUE

DC: If you can't stretch to one of the ED scopes above, take a serious look at this one. I liked this eyepiece, but Opticron have a large range of eyepieces that will fit, so, even if you're not sure about this one, there are plenty of others to choose from, including zooms. If your budget is squeezed, this package is really very

good value for money.

MM: ALL the innovative design advantages of the ED, and although the image isn't quite as impressive, it's still more than respectable and offers an awful lot of punch in a very neat little package. It comes at a very manageable price, too.

OPTICS 8

DESIGN ETC 8.5

VALUE FOR MONEY 9