



Introducing: The New Leica Noctivid

In the March/April 2017 issue of *Bird Watcher's Digest*, I wrote a column about how binoculars, in particular premium binoculars, arrive on the market at such a high price point. The short answer is that they are meticulously made, and under certain viewing conditions, allow you to see detail that less expensive binoculars simply can't bring to your eye. The newly released Leica Noctivid is one such binocular, firmly falling within the echelon of top-tier birding optics and carrying with it the requisite price tag (\$2,599 for the 8x42). I've had a chance to spend the past month with 8x42 Noctivids, including extensive field time birding with them among the pinewoods and beach dunes of coastal Georgia. From dawn to dusk and from sand through salt water, the Noctivids were easily up to any challenges I could throw their way.

Aesthetics and Ergonomics

Anyone familiar with Leica's product line will take one look

at the Noctivid and see that it's a new type of binocular for Leica. The past three Leica introductions of their top-tier model (Ultra-vid, Ultravid HD, and Ultravid HD Plus) have featured optical enhancements packaged in the same well-designed yet traditional roof-prism body style they have been using since 2003. With the Noctivid, Leica departs from this and joins the ranks of binoculars designed with an open bridge center hinge, allowing users to fully wrap their fingers around the binocular's barrels. This style was first popularized with Swarovski's EL, later adapted by Zeiss in their Victory SF model, and now seems to have found a home in Leica's product line with the Noctivid. When it's well executed, it's a comfortable and natural way to handle a binocular. I have no doubt birders will embrace another open-bridge addition to the high-end binocular offerings currently available.

Another area where Leica scores style points is with the no-



The Leica Noctivid.

frills minimalist industrial design of the Noctivid. You won't find any ergonomic thumb stops or indentations on the bottom of the barrels, nor will you find sculpting of the body indicating where your hands should grip the binocular. At just under 6 inches tall, the Noctivid presents the most compact body design of the open-bridge 42mm models available, yet there seems to be plenty of room for me to fully wrap my fingers around the binocular's barrels. Continuing with the theme of a neutral presence in the hand, the rubber armoring provides a comfortable grip and tactile experience without the addition of any texture to the surface. Despite its slightly smaller stature, the Noctivid isn't exactly a featherweight, weighing in at just over 30 ounces, typical

for a high-end 42mm binocular. The density of the high-grade glass used in lenses and prisms is likely what keeps all binoculars offering a similar quality view to the Noctivid above the 27-ounce threshold. To sum up the Noctivid's tactile presentation, I would characterize it as being compact and ergonomically efficient.

Mechanics and Functionality

The mechanical components of the Noctivid are well executed in both design and precision, which is essential for any binocular in this class. I've always found the right-eye diopter adjustment mechanism from Leica to be among the most well thought-out in the industry. The first Leica product I ever owned was a 10x42 Trinovid BN that I purchased in the late 1990s. The locking diop-

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ter, which was built into the binocular's center focus wheel, was a nice feature, but not unique. What was eye-catching was the easy-to-read diopter indicator that could be viewed in a small window on the back of the focus wheel. One glance at the binocular could tell you your exact diopter setting. Not only was it functional, but it also looked cool, like having a speedometer on your focus wheel. Leica has carried over this design element in its Ultravid series and now in the Noctivid, as well. It has become a hallmark of Leica's binocular design.

The binocular's eyecups are well designed, sturdy, and easily removable for cleaning or replacement. Birders who use optics while wearing glasses will find the Noctivids, with 19mm of eye relief, comfortable and easy to use, with full access to the binocular's 404-foot field of view. Firm stops along the travel of the eyecups allow them to be put in multiple positions, making them adjustable enough to accommodate birder faces of all shapes and sizes. Couple this with a minimal interpupillary distance of 56 mm (the barrels can be squeezed *reeeeaaally* close together), and you have an instrument capable of being adjusted to fit the needs of any user.

If you move your attention to the other end of the binocular's barrels, you'll find a set of well-



The Leica Noctivid.

Specs:

- Size:** 8x42
- Eye Relief:** 19mm
- Field of View:** 404 feet/1,000 yards
- Close Focus:** 6 feet
- Weight:** 30.3 ounces
- Interpupillary Distance:** 56–74mm
- Weatherproofing:** Waterproof/ internally fogproof
- Packaged with:** Case, neck strap, tethered objective lens covers, rain guard, lifetime warranty

designed and fully utilitarian objective lens covers. A challenge of the open bridge design is that the front hinge of the binocular inevitably gets placed far down the length of the barrels, close to the objective lens. This creates a common problem in that there isn't much real estate left at the front of the binocular for a

tethered lens cover to grab hold of. Swarovski recently came up with an innovative, if not slightly finicky, solution to this dilemma in their latest generation of the EL binoculars, whereas the Zeiss Victory SF's cover leaves a bit to be desired in this birder's opinion. Leica may have the best solution of the three, with a well-designed ring that fits around each barrel and center hinge of the binocular that a lens cover will snap into. The lens cover itself grips the inner rim of the objective barrel snugly and securely. They are easy to put in place and quickly remove. Admittedly, I seldom use objective lens covers as I often find them to be a nuisance. I find Leica's solu-

tion here to be the most palatable option I've seen to date on an open-hinge binocular.

One thing missing on the Noctivids—and this is typical of other European-made binoculars—is an attachment point to mount a tripod adapter onto the binoculars. This generally isn't a show stopper for most birding uses, but note that if you want to mount your binoculars on a tripod or car-window mount, you'll need to find a specific style of tripod adapter to get the job done with the Noctivid.

Optical Performance

We've seen an absolutely wonderful trend emerge with premium binocular models: lens systems

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designed to increase peripheral edge clarity (often referred to as field-flattening lenses), accompanied by an ever-widening field of view. Swarovski was first to popularize this with their Swarovision EL, then Zeiss introduced a similar design with the Victory SF, and now Leica has embraced this trend with the Noctivid and its 404-foot/1,000-yard field of view. This is the optical feature that sets the Noctivid apart from Leica's Ultravid HD Plus and brings Leica's binocular line up to speed with their competitors. Although it's tempting to ask "What took you so long?" I'm just glad they've finally gotten here. A generous and clear field of view is something birders of all abilities can take advantage of and appreciate.

Another area where Leica finally seems to have gotten the memo is in their recognition that birders do indeed value a close-focusing binocular. I've gathered around hummingbird feeders with other birders, marveling at brightly costumed nymphs zipping and dodging about various feeding stations, and on more than one occasion have seen Leica users in the group needing to back away from feeders in order to get their optics to focus on them. The 42mm Ultravid HD models will focus barely closer than 10 feet, which, by today's standards, is minimally adequate. Leica fans can now rejoice knowing that, for

what may be the first time ever, there is a premium Leica binocular that will focus within 6 feet.

Attempting to crown a victor in the battle for top optical performance can be a fool's errand. One can look back at Diane and Michael Porter's "Clash of the Titans" review of top-of-the-line Leica, Zeiss, and Swarovski binoculars to see this (July/August 2015). I'm not going to go into technical references to specialized types of glass, internal baffling, and how many different lens elements are used in what optical groupings. The nuances and subtleties of optical performance can rarely be teased apart on instruments of this caliber without comparing them under extremely controlled circumstances. Even then, birders will seldom, if ever, encounter those controlled environments when birding in field and forest. The resolution, contrast, and brightness of the new Noctivid is exactly where it needs to be to hold its own with the Victory SF and Swarovski EL. It's a truly competitive model among the elite class of optics and doesn't disappoint the eyes under any viewing circumstances.

If you're in a position to evaluate the top binocular models of the day, I would encourage you to experience and embrace the high degree of optical parity among the contenders and focus your attention on the more tangible

differences of ergonomics and comfort in the hand and up to your eyes. You should approach the optics of the Noctivid with high expectations, confident that they won't disappoint.

Athene noctua

The Noctivid has a birdy namesake, the little owl (*Athene noctua*) that you will often see featured in Leica's advertisements and marketing materials for the Noctivid. I asked about the significance of the little owl as a mascot of sorts for this new product. First, it recognizes the origins of the Noctivid as being an instrument designed with birders in mind. Second, this tiny bird of prey is diurnal, effectively see-

ing during both day and night. It's a good match for the Noctivid, complementing the binocular's compact body, efficient design, and capability to resolve detail in all lighting conditions. Not all of us are ready, willing, or able to pay the \$2,500 price of admission to get our hands on an instrument of this caliber, but for those of you who are considering a swim in the waters of optical perfection, the Leica Noctivid is a new contender worth your consideration.

Ben Lizdas has 16 years of experience in the birding optics business and is the ad sales director for Bird Watcher's Digest.

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