

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Focus on 'Binocs'

Now is a good time to upgrade or buy your first pair of binoculars



CU Maurice River member, Cheryl Howell enjoys some riverside birding.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

One of the phenomena that the COVID pandemic has caused is a great increase in people's interest in the out-of-doors and nature. Quite a few people have taken to the trails and many of you are newbies to

nature-watching. Those of us who are long-seasoned participants know that our experience can be greatly enhanced by a good set of optics. We're talking binoculars, binocs, or simply bins. If you're an old hand at using binocs it might be time to upgrade and pass along your old pair of binoculars to an up-and-coming appreciator or a child.



Each year CU Maurice River introduces children to the use of optics.

I remember when I was very young my father had a pair of Zeisses. Dad was of primarily German ancestry and he would harp on about how excellent "German-made beauties" were. He trusted me to use them from a very young age and it opened a world to me that otherwise would have remained but a blur. In my teens it was discovered that I needed eyeglasses and prior to that bins gave me a clarity that was keenly lacking otherwise.

Watching squirrels, birds, butterflies, and even sporting events was so amazingly enhanced by these aides. Colors that would otherwise go unnoticed came to life. They opened up a new world for me.

On our walks I have found that people who are introduced to the proper way to use binoculars can't wait to purchase a pair. For years good binoculars were an expensive proposition. Today you can still take out a second mortgage to get an amazing pair: however there are many options to fit every budget.



Naturalist/Teacher Anthony Klock enjoys the spring migration at Belleplaine State Forest.

Let's talk a bit about some of their uses, then how to operate them, and lastly share a great opportunity to purchase a pair or upgrade your existing bins.

I just read a survival article about disassembling your binoculars to start a fire using a lens as a magnifying glass, or a mirror as a signaling device.

Inverting your binoculars makes a great jeweler's loop for splinter removal or a magnifying glass for inspecting flowers and other biota up close, or for reading the small print on maps. In areas with topography you can often plan your route. Sometimes on a rainy day, if I suspect a store is closed or a "closed" sign is displayed, I slip my bins out of the glove box to read the hours posted on the door before leaving my car.

Okay, hardly outback survival, but it is convenient. Do people look at me strangely? I don't know because I have binocular vision (yes that is my idea of a joke and yes, I'm a nerd, but I'm a cool nerd, so go with it). And honestly, in most parts of New Jersey you will never hear of, let alone see, anyone disassemble their bins as a means of survival. Civilization is normally quite close at hand.

At the shore they're great for finding people you are looking to rendezvous with at the beach, or for watching

boats, surfers, wind-boarders, sea birds, boat races, water skiers, motorsports, musical concerts, and more. Be warned that if you are watching people that is generally listed under 'creepy,' unless it is your children or a sporting event. But boaters, fisherman, and hunters find binoculars invaluable for their endeavors. The people I associate with are mostly watching wildlife and primarily birds. The US Fish and Wildlife Service found that 101.6 million Americans, or 40 percent of the US population 16 years and older, participated in wildlife-related activities i.e. fishing, hunting, and wildlife observation. Likely the most common use for binoculars is bird-watching. It is considered an essential equipment for this endeavor. Once you see the details of a bird's plumage, that incredible iridescence, through a good set of binoculars it is hard to go out unassisted again.

Let's talk a bit about using binoculars. First of all you want to use a pair that has a central focus wheel, not separate eye adjustments. They should also have a 'diopter' that allows you to compensate for the fact that your eyes will have some differences in acuity and near- or far-sightedness.

The first step is to make the distance between the two barrels line up with

your eyes. Hold the bins up to your eyes and gently move the barrels by turning your hands until you see one circular image, not two, and no black edges - nice. Now your spacing is correct.

Next you need to set the eyecups to allow the optimum distance between your eyes and the binocular lenses. Generally speaking, if you do not wear eye glasses, the eyecups should be in the extended, or "up" position. If you do wear glasses, the eyecups should be twisted down. (If you wear glasses all the time, then you should also be wearing them to use binoculars.) The eyecup position is an important adjustment. Some binoculars have incremental adjustments to get the exact distance needed. If you are seeing black flashes, "vignetting" in the image, then the eyecups may need to be adjusted up or down.

Okay, then find a stationary object to focus on. Zero in on it as best you can. Now it's time for that 'diopter' we mentioned. Close your right eye and use the central focus to make things as clear as possible for your left eye. Then close your left eye (yes, and open your right - and yes, more weird humor) and adjust the diopter to as sharp a view as possible.



Wendy Walker and Christine Brown do some exploring at the Maurice River Bicycle and walking trail in Millville, NJ.

Now when you open both eyes the object you picked should be the sharpest achievable image. You may wish to take note of the diopter setting (normally a number or dot) in case you change it accidentally. From here on out you simply use the center wheel to focus on any object you wish to examine. Because you are using two eyes you should get a sense of depth of field and very clear views. If you don't, one of a number of things is happening. Your binoculars may need to be checked for alignment, or cleaned, or they may just not be very good optics.

If they are out of adjustment reputable manufacturers will repair or clean them even internally. If you live in New Jersey you are in luck because the binocular pros are NJ Audubon. Here in southern New Jersey their Northwood Center at 701 E. Lake Drive, Cape May Point is the best place to get assistance or to purchase the right pair of binoculars for you.

Okay, a little more about how to use them. First of all keep a strap around your neck or use harness straps made for bins. There is nothing worse than having them fall overboard; good binoculars are waterproof, but first you have to find them. You also don't want them to break; good binoculars are sturdy, but scratched or broken lenses are not useful!

Getting on a bird is often difficult for people. Here's the trick. Spot it with your eyes – then fix your gaze on the bird and raise your binocs to your eyes. The locking is the secret: stare and raise.

Now here is another trick, taught to me by Paul Greenfeld, a very famous artist and birder. If you are looking high into the trees your neck may start to ache. Even many of the best birders don't know this trick, so you can send me your signed baseball cards or pork belly

futures if you feel compelled. You don't necessarily need to raise your chin or tilt your head back, you can just raise your eyes to look through binoculars. This takes some practice but believe me your neck will thank you. I tend to do this only after my neck tells me it's tired. But I'm guessing you'll be a faster learner than myself.

Now let's talk about buying binoculars. Pocketbook will play a part in your decision. And today you are lucky because there are some nice binoculars in the \$300 – 1000 range. You can get in the game for \$150 but if you can afford more that would be a good idea. If money is no object, I would say you may want to consider the \$2000 range. Also NJ Audubon often sells demos for less than the market value.

In homage to dearly-departed Dad, Zeiss makes some neat "Terra ED" that on sale, can be gotten for less than their \$499 value. Now I am not a binocular saleswoman nor will I pretend to be. But I am a binocular advocate. Let me quote from the people who know much more about it than I do:

NJ Audubon, "Most birders prefer 7- or 8-power binoculars because they're bright and have a wide field of view, making it easier to find birds and to follow them in flight. Optics with objective lenses—the glass at the fat end of the tube—

larger than 42 mm are heavier, and those smaller than 30 mm, while lightweight, aren't bright enough to show detail in poor light."

So these are some figures to consider in your search. Also think about how you want to use binoculars. Do you want them to focus close for butterflies and insects? Do you like far-off raptors or birding in the woods? How heavy a pair will you comfortably carry? If you won't tote them with you it sort of defeats the purpose!

It's is daunting to make a selection with so many models. New Jersey Audubon's staff can help you navigate these decisions and will let you compare binoculars. Some folks will see the difference between a very fine pair and a less costly pair. If you can't see that difference it doesn't make a lot of sense to spend more. And if you notice all the finer points you may not be happy until you can get the pair you like best.

I wanted to discuss binoculars now because NJ Audubon has their big optic sale this coming weekend on April 10-11. *Before the weekend of the sale*, you have the opportunity to test different pairs and ask staffers' advice on your needs. So get in the game, or upgrade if you like. I suggest first spending some time on their website:

www.featheredgeoptics.org. See the sidebar for sale details.

A good pair can serve you well for a lifetime of enjoyment. So spring for the best you need and can afford; you will be so happy you did!

Sources

2016 US Dept. of Interior, US Fish and Wildlife Service Survey.

**(please scroll for information on the sale)*

**26th ANNUAL OPTICS SALE
NJ Audubon**

Saturday and Sunday, April 10th and 11th

Sale prices take effect at 6 a.m. Saturday
and end at 4 a.m. on Sunday

10% off many brands, bargains on demos
and loaners

If you know what you want, you can order directly on the website at www.featheredgeoptics.org. Or you can call and talk to the staff Saturday or Sunday to ask questions and place an order. Curbside pickup of in-stock items will be available or they offer free shipping if you cannot pick up your purchase.

Prior to the sale, CMBO's Northwood Center at 701 E. Lake Drive, Cape May Point, is OPEN Wednesday through Friday, April 9th, 9:30am – 4:30pm. Remember, it will be CLOSED during the Optics Sale Weekend, so the last day to visit and test the optics before the sale is Friday, April 9th.

Please tell the folks at CMBO that CU Maurice River sent you. No, we are not on commission; we just recognize how much our members appreciate NJ Audubon's expertise.