



GRAND TRAVERSE AUDUBON CLUB

A Chapter of the Michigan Audubon Society

Choosing binoculars

When people take up birding, they're faced with a big question: what binoculars should I get? The classic answer is, it depends. Let's break down that question in order to guide your choice.

First, consider the numbers. On the end you look into, you'll see something like 8x, 42. The first number, with the x, is the magnification. Your subject will look bigger in a 10x binocular than in an 8x binocular. The tradeoff is that an 8x binocular usually gives you a wider field of view. With a narrower field of view, like in a 10x binocular, your target will be harder to find. If you're new to birding, stick with an 8x binocular. If you start birding at greater distances, like finding hawks as they migrate overhead, birding in the expansive prairies of the West, or looking for birds on pelagic trips (on the ocean), then you might want to consider upgrading to a 10x.

The second number, in our example the 42, is the size of the lens on the far end of the binocular. The bigger that number, the more light gets in, so the better you'll be able to see in low light conditions. This may or may not apply to your style of birding. For years, I carried a pair of 7x, 26 compact binoculars. They performed well most of the time, but failed one evening when I was trying to identify shorebirds roosting on a beach at dusk. I borrowed my friend's 7x, 42 and I could see them just fine. Picked up two new lifers! The industry standard for birding seems to be 8x, 42 these days, and they'll suit most birders just fine. Note that the ratio of 42 to 8 is a little over 5. Older or cheaper binoculars might have numbers with a ratio less than 5, and you'll be less than satisfied with them.

Most binoculars these days are straight tubes, or roof prism designs, and they will serve you quite well. Buy from a dealer that knows what they're doing, has several options, and can fit you to a pair.

How do they feel in your hand? Really light binoculars will be hard to hold still; heavy binoculars will make your arms tired.

Do they fit your eyes? Do the lenses come together so you see one circle? Some models fit people with closer-set eyes better than others.

Does the crisp image go all the way to the edges? This speaks to lens quality. Also, make sure the lenses are coated. The package will say so.

Do you wear glasses while birding? Just about all binoculars worth having will have rubber "eye cups" on the eyepieces that will fold down or twist so you can get the lenses as close to your eyes as possible. If the binoculars don't have this feature, put them back.

One very important feature is a cover for the eyepieces. In addition to keeping rain off the lenses, they also keep crumbs and dust from falling on them. Enjoy that croissant while birding!

In the beginning, use the binoculars you can afford, within reason. Get something that will let you get out there and enjoy birds. With that said, spend as much as you can afford, because you really get what you pay for. It may be best to start with something affordable until you see if birding is right for you. You can upgrade if you get serious about this hobby/ pastime/ lifestyle.

Some final words: Binoculars are set for your eyes, and it's really hard to get a satisfying look if you share a pair. You'll be happier with your own. Compact binoculars (small ones) made of plastic are toys. They're tempting for kids, but they usually don't perform well. Lastly, the best binoculars are the ones in your hands when you're out birding!