EXPERT REVIEWS

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Flyweight advantage

Launched earlier this year, Hawke's newly upgraded Vantage binocular packs a big punch at entry level, says *Mike Alibone*.

REVIEW

Hawke Vantage 8x42 binocular

IN terms of 'performance per pound', it appears that Hawke is bang on the money with the release on to the market of its recently upgraded Vantage 8x and 10x magnification, 42 mm binoculars.

This low-cost binocular sits at the bottom of Hawke's price range for 42 mm models and is marketed as being 'perfect for new nature enthusiasts or when shopping on a budget' and I was pleasantly surprised to discover just what the 8x42 delivered in the field.

During initial use, the first thing that impressed me was just how little it weighed. Barely tipping the scales at 555 g, it's right down there at the low end of the weight range for any 42 mm binocular. This is principally the result of its polycarbonate chassis and trim rubber armouring – the latter lightly textured so as to render it non-slip. Two shallow thumb-rests are perfectly positioned below each ocular.

Another, although small, contributing factor to shedding those grams is the lean rubber covering on the eyecups, the ends of which it only narrowly clears to produce a thin, bevelled edge, which I found reasonably comfortable against the eye. The eyecups themselves twist out to very firmly click-lock in three positions above the fully retracted setting. These are among the most positive positional eyecup locking mechanisms I have encountered and they are not easily displaced – neither accidentally during use nor when applying, or removing, the soft, articulated rain guard.



The full field of view is visible when the eyecups are fully retracted or when they are locked in the first position above the latter setting, but not in the two further extended positions. While the 122 m at 1,000 m field of view won't win any prizes for being extensive, it does score in its breadth of sharpness and low level of curvature.

Mounted on the right ocular, the ribbed dioptre ring allows easy single-eye focusing adjustment and remains in position once set, without the need for a locking mechanism. It can be adjusted without the requirement to raise the eyecup.

Turning freely and smoothly through approximately two-and-a-quarter anti-clockwise rotations between close focus and infinity, I found the milled, rubber-coated central focusing wheel comfortable and easy to use. Squeezing the close focus distance down to just 2 m, I was able to beat the manufacturer's quoted figure of 2.5 m, although from this point it takes approximately one-and-a-half rotations to hit the 10-m range before a further third of a turn moves the image in focus swiftly on to approximately 500 m.

BAK-4 prisms and multi-coated optical components are

48 Light and airy
Hawke's new Vantage 8x42 binocular is put through its paces.

49 At the touch of a button
A remarkable app that recognises nature in an instant.

50 And the winner is ...
Find out which image won our extremely popular Kittiwake Photo Challenge.

51 Whale watching
A superb field guide to the world's cetaceans leaves our reviewer impressed.

51 Musings on wildlife
Thoughtful and reflective essays that'll make the reader stop and think for a while.

52 Swan song
This book offers plenty of informative comment, but ultimately feels like a missed opportunity.

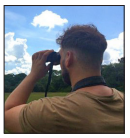
THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL


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ROB HUME began watching birds as a child. He worked for the RSPB for many years and has written several books.


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ED STUBBS is *Birdwatch*'s Deputy Editor and has a keen interest in migration and patch birding.


KEITH BETTON is Chairman of the Hampshire Ornithological Society and Hampshire County Recorder.

incorporated in the design and an assessment of the image itself reveals a well-balanced representation of colours backed by a nice level of contrast and detail. Whether the latter related to my close-up view of a House Fly on a brick wall or a distant Peregrine Falcon on a pylon, the Vantage undoubtedly delivered more than satisfactorily. There is, of course, chromatic aberration to contend with and while it is clearly most noticeable in the outer quarters of the image, its presence in the middle section is within acceptable limits.

Consistent with other models in the Hawke range, the Vantage comes with a comfortable stretchy, padded lanyard, a soft, zip-up carry case, stretchy drawstring bag, objective lens covers and an articulated rain guard as already described. Hawke has also gone plastic-free in its supply of optics so no internal polythene/plastic bags are used in the packing of the product when it is supplied.

For the suggested retail price of £129, the Vantage 8x42 represents incredibly good value.

Further info

- **Price:** £129
- **Size:** 146 x 128 mm
- **Weight:** 555 g
- **Field of view:** 122 m at 1,000 m
- **Light transmission:** not available
- **Close focus:** 2.5 m
- **Gas-filled:** yes
- **Waterproof:** yes
- **Guarantee:** Lifetime

Verdict

- ✅ Remarkably lightweight and well made
- ✅ Sharp image and low level of curvature
- ❌ Some chromatic aberration in outer quarters of image

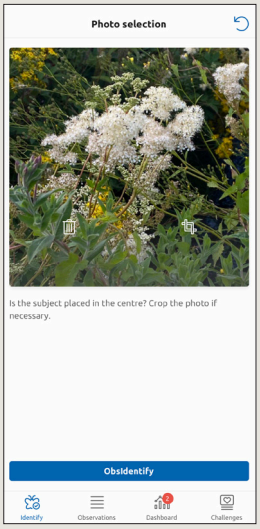
The ideal companion

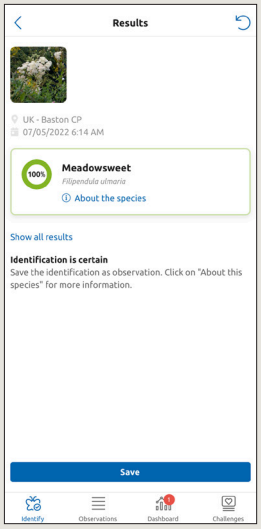
ObsIdentify app for iOS and Android

'RECOGNISE nature in one click' is what the ObsIdentify app proudly pronounces when first opened. And recognise it does – or at least it has for pretty much everything I've tried it on so far in the few weeks that I've been using it.

The ObsIdentify app, available to download free of charge for both iOS and Android, is a venture from the Dutch non-profit foundation, Observation International, which is responsible for Observation.org, a citizen science sightings platform where, in a similar vein to the more familiar eBird, BirdTrack or iRecord apps, members of the public are encouraged to record nature they see and then submit observations. While Observation.org is less widely used in Britain, it is very popular in several European countries and has built up a formidable database and following.

This has allowed for the creation of ObsIdentify, an image recognition app that allows users to identify puzzling flora or fauna while in the field. The app's AI is built on the huge volume of observations submitted and, as I found out, already seems to be highly accurate. Although the app has been around a couple of years already, it is now being used increasingly by British naturalists and thus is surging to prominence here – and deservedly so.







Thanks to AI, ObsIdentify readily recognises the wildlife you encounter in the field.

Overall, this is a slickly designed app and I found it very easy to use. Simply take a photo of the mystery species and then press 'identify'. After a few seconds, an answer is produced. More often than not, the app gave an answer with 100% certainty, although with a few micro moths and plants it occasionally threw up multiple options. For every identification, a handy 'About the species' option links through to the taxon page on the Observation.org website in just a couple of clicks, where text, photos, sounds (if applicable) and observations can be explored.

The 'Save' option adds an observation to your account (free to create), automatically recording it and feeding back stats. There are a couple of other nice touches: the Badges feature sets goals and is a good way to engage newcomers and, importantly, youngsters (this is real-life Pokémon GO!), while Challenges encourage you to search for certain species in conjunction with other observers.

As an amateur botanist, this was a really useful app for immediately identifying numerous unknown plants on a recent trip to Norfolk. It has also been brilliant for moth trapping – no need to tediously flick through the field guide for every micro, for this app more often than not saves plenty of time and, at the very least, points you in the right direction if it doesn't offer a conclusive identification. It's well worth downloading. ***Josh Jones***

MORE INFO · **Price:** free · **Further details:** Available to download via the App Store (iOS) or Play Store (Android).