So much CHOICE!

Mark Camoccio compares four different binoculars from Hawke



Whether hunting, stalking, twitching, or just out appreciating Mother Nature, a pair of binoculars can enhance the experience enormously. That's why many outdoor enthusiasts consider a set of 'binos' a vital accessory.

So, on test here are four different models from Hawke Optics. All come with the same 8x magnification and 42mm objectives. However, take a look at those prices, and we have a real spread of costs. An ideal opportunity then, and an interesting exercise to highlight what you are getting for the money, and how the four compare at their respective price points. So, firstly, let's take a look at what comes in the box.



All price points are covered here, from £149 to £729

Vantage 8x42

At £149, these binos are effectively the entry-level set in our line-up. They come in a cloth protective bag with a soft, wide neck strap, which should be attached to the binoculars immediately. There's also a lens cloth, instruction booklet, and soft canvas-style carry case, which can either go over the shoulder or be attached to a belt. The optics themselves have flip-up front lens covers and removable, rear rubber cups. These have a small eyelet, so I would link the two with a small piece of cord from the off, to avoid losing them.

Endurance ED 8X42

The Endurance are the next up from the Vantage at £289. Again, they come protected in a thin cloth bag. In addition, they get a smart semi-rigid case with its own strap, and again, there's a cosy padded strap for the binos themselves. Lens covers and instructions are here, and the same lens cap configuration too.

Frontier ED X 8X42

OK, it's quite a price jump to the £499 Frontier ED X. The same lens cap configuration is here, plus a lens cloth and instructions, and this time we get a larger semi-hard case, complete with a magnetic flip-over catch, zip, and straps.

Frontier APO 8x42

These are the top-of-the-range binoculars at £729. The inclusions are identical to the Frontier ED X above, with the semi-hard case and magnetic clasp offering full protection where necessary.

The basic test?

So, the big question is: how to differentiate between the four models on test? I did have it in mind that I would trot out my technical resolution chart, but with this set up, first at 50 yards and then 20 yards, it didn't really shed much light. 8x magnification is comparatively low to read the fine figures, and no great difference here was discernable. However, viewing a farmhouse across the fields, clocked at 1.4 miles away, proved the perfect task to evaluate performance and handling in a practical scenario.

Notes from the Field

First up were the Vantage, and the cheapest set in the line-up. I quickly played with these, and then moved straight to the top-of-the-range Frontier APOs, just to get some comparison. The Vantage are the lightest set on show here, and whilst the overall weight differential isn't huge, it may be a consideration for some. The overall feel is pretty good, and whilst the grip afforded by the main body is more basic, with a harder shell composite used, some moulded finger wells really enhanced the feel.

All these binos feature a dioptre adjuster for the right eye ocular lens. This is set by closing the left eye and then adjusting the +/- knurled wheel for clarity while using the right eye. Do this at the outset so that personal eyesight requirements have then been taken into account. Now, the central focusing wheel can be used, and in the case of the Vantage, the wheel does turn more easily than the other models. More likely to be accidentally knocked maybe, but hey, I'm nitpicking. At the rear, both eyecups are designed to extend and jump in three stages as required. This allows the binoculars to fit individual facial dimensions for additional comfort. On test, I left them wound right in for the best image.

Head position seemed more critical with the Vantage, to achieve that full circular image, making it a little harder to maintain it over an extended period. As for the image quality, Hawke utilizes their H2 glass here, and all I can say is the difference between these and the top Frontier set, isn't in proportion to the price differential. Maybe the image is a little milkier at distance compared to the Frontier APOs, and there is less stand-out definition outside of the focused


All these binoculars feature flip-down rubber lens caps



Extremely smooth focusing comes as standard with the Frontier APO set


Those finger wells really enhance the Vantage feel, note the dioptre adjuster too



The rubber grip found on the Frontier EDX binoculars feels the best of the lot



All four binoculars get a quality padded neck strap



Both Endurance ED eye cups are extendable and super-smooth in operation

point, but damn good all-around performance, conceding little to the other two models.

Next!

Picking up the Endurance ED 8X42s, they instantly feel more 'grippy', courtesy of that scored pattern in the side moulding. It feels like a slightly softer plastic too, which appeals. The front flip caps felt a little loose, and whilst they look more discreet than those of the Vantage, I can see them being an irritant as they fail to stay in place, unlike the Vantage caps.

Again, the rear eye cups adjust in three stages, but these are much smoother, and can be set at mid-stage. I achieved the full picture fully wound in, but they will prove useful for some, I'm sure.

As for image quality, the Endurance EDs offered a good, vibrant image, plus great definition. The central focus wheel is smooth in operation, but again, moves a little too freely. Hawke's System H5 glass is at play here, and when viewing the full-distance target on test, the mid-ground was definitely more alive and vibrant than when viewed through the Vantage binoculars.

Up we go!

And so to Hawke's Frontier ED X 8x42s, which are designed to satisfy the serious outdoor enthusiast who's prepared to pay for their sport. These binoculars just feel classy from the off, but we've now jumped to £499, so they should! The exterior body is very tactile, showing a soft, textured, rubberized material, and with those deep ridges all part of the moulding, grip is at a premium. The front caps are substantial and protective, whilst the rear eye cups are soft touch, and move smoothly through two stages if required. The appearance is certainly smart, as there are aluminium rings incorporated on both eyepieces and the focus wheel, but let's face it, it's all about performance, certainly at this price point.

Focusing with the central wheel was easy, and with just a little more resistance to the movement, a more stable image can be maintained. These binos get the top-grade System H7 glass, and on test, the image was crisp and vibrant throughout (with the rear cups wound in) and was easy to maintain in the hold.

Overall, they are hard to fault, and if I didn't have the top-of-the-range set for comparison at the time, I would have been perfectly satisfied.

The bee's knees

And so to the crème de la crème - Hawke's Frontier APO 8X42s. These sit at the top of their tree, but at £729, they are a big spend. Looking at the basics first, the front caps are low profile, yet almost suction fit into their recess, so reassuringly positive. At the rear, the eye cups are again pleasingly soft rubber, and here, move to three stop points. They can, however, be adjusted out to any point in between. Handling is secure with that fine textured grip, but on balance, I prefer the slightly softer feel on the Frontier binos.

There's no doubting the performance here though, with extremely smooth and nicely weighted focus from the central control, and an easy view/maintainable image. The Frontier APO set utilizes the same System H7 glass as featured in the Frontier ED X, but here, there seems just slightly more richness of colour to the image quality. As mentioned, the test comprised viewing the distant farmhouse, and here, when the light changed as the sun hit the roof, added detail of dampness was discernable with the Frontier APOs, offering finer detail that was just that little bit vague when viewed back through the Vantage set, and not so fine with either of the other models. Very fine margins, but that's what you pay for here.

Verdict

An interesting exercise then. So, what's the verdict? Well, in theory, there's a place for all of these products, sitting at their price points, and offering the punter a product to suit a particular budget. And at the end of the day, it largely depends on how much cash we are prepared to throw at it. It's also vital to hammer home the point again, that the quality differential isn't directly proportional to the respective asking prices. At £149, the Vantage 8x42s are effectively entry-level, yet their real-world performance is extremely good, and perfectly acceptable for many of us who simply don't require the nth degree of performance that's available at the top end.

There's no doubt the Frontier APO 8x42s just sneaked it, but are they worth the extra lolly? For me, the Frontier ED X binoculars were the all-around winners, just because of that extra feel and handling, plus they conceded very little in down range image quality, yet come in at a far more realistic RRP.

Whichever route you take, all models are nitrogen purged, waterproof, fog proof, and come with Hawke's 'No-Fault Lifetime Warranty', which is nice to know.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

- **VANTAGE 8X42** - £149
- **ENDURANCE ED 8X42** - £289
- **FRONTIER ED X 8X42** - £499
- **FRONTIER APO 8X42** - £729
- **CONTACT:** Hawke Optics - www.hawkeoptics.com