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Optics

Bowhunters have better quality and better values in optics today more than ever. Technology, manufacturing efficiency and competition have led to some really good stuff for really reasonable prices compared to a decade ago. We got our mitts on a dozen-plus sets of great glasses, and present our findings here.

Zeiss Conquest 8x30

Four models in the Conquest series are available from Zeiss ranging from 8x to 15x. Those we tried are the most compact, lowest power and lowest price. The 8x30s are 5 inches long and weigh a pleasant 16 ounces.

Focusing is accomplished with a center wheel broad enough to use with both hands (the added speed and precision is sometimes useful). Diopter adjustment is with a center wheel on the distal end of the axle, which is unusual and we found more convenient than the more common eyepiece diopter adjustment. Eyecups are adjusted by twisting and are lockable. The glasses come with a wide strap, Cordura case and lens covers.

Zeiss has always been among our favorite optics; one field tester carries a set of early 1990s Classic 10x40s on a daily basis. There's no disputing the quality of glass made by this German company, and it applies to the Hungarian-manufactured Conquest series. We found the Conquest sharp and bright and a remarkable value—those Classics cost \$1,400, 15 years ago! **Contact:** www.zeiss.com/sports; (800) 441-3005



\$599

Nikon Monarch ATB 10x42

\$340



That's ATB for All-Terrain Binocular, Nikon's newest offering designed for hunters (not butterfly watchers, as the name might imply). Available in three powers and two colors, we tried the 10x42 model in Realtree Hardwoods hard-rubber armor. All are compact, at about 21 ounces and less than 6 inches long, and have a large center focusing dial, compensating dial on the right eyepiece, and twist-out eye cups. They come with a wide, leather-lined strap, lens covers and Cordura case.

We brought these to our eyes, instantly recognized the optical quality that has made Nikon famous, and wondered, "How can they make these for such a low price?" Our testing showed these to be as sharp and bright as any of the models we tried. Nikon says the optical elements are "precision aligned for extended viewing" (it's slight misalignment that makes you feel punch drunk and cross-eyed after a while using poorer-quality binocs). We could not dispute Nikon's claim; they were a pleasure to use.

Full-featured yet simple, Nikon's Monarchs have everything we want in binoculars. They are compact, lightweight, sharp, bright, armored and affordable. **Contact:** www.nikonusa.com; (631) 547-4200.

Swarovski Swarobright EL 10x32



\$1,754

When you pick up a pair of binocs with a price tag approaching two grand, you expect a lot and bring them to a critical eye. These Swarovskis did not disappoint; they reek of highest quality. The question is whether that level of quality is worth four times the price of some other fine binoculars.

The Swarovski EL series is a handsome binocular with plenty of thought into design, appearance and ergonomics. At under 6 inches and 22 ounces, it is compact and easy to handle. The distinctive wide center gap makes it easy to wrap a hand around either barrel, a significant boost to easy handling. Focusing and diopter adjustment are both built into a generously sized center dial.

We loved using these top-shelf binoculars; sharpness and brightness were unsurpassed and they are truly easier to handle than most.

If you're the type of bowhunter who demands the highest quality in gear whatever the price, these are the binocs for you. **Contact:** www.swarovskioptik.com; info@swarovskioptik.at

Brunton Epoch X85

Brunton first introduced its Epoch series a few years ago, and we're as impressed today as we were then. With the Epoch Brunton wanted to make the best bino available, and in doing so reportedly tracked down the highest grade, most-advanced glass available. Brunton says this is something called "SF" glass, and the company reports it is the only manufacturer to use it in a binocular. We honestly couldn't tell the difference between the optical clarity and sharpness of these Epochs and the other high-end models in this test—but, as with most high-end models we've tested, once you put them to your eyes there is an immediate realization that you're holding something truly special. The Epoch further sets itself apart with its cool futuristic-looking

body armor styling—available in both charcoal gray and camo—which covers a durable, lightweight magnesium alloy frame (total weight is a very manageable 25 ounces). Equally cool is this bino's velvet-smooth variable focus knob, which offers a near focus of just 36 inches. **Contact:** (307) 857-4700; www.brunton.com



\$1,450



\$590

Kowa BD42-8 & BD42-10

Here's a line of premium binocs that recently came to our attention, with styling and performance reminiscent of some other favorite high-end lines. Rough-and-tumble bowhunters will appreciate the ergonomic, rubber-armored design and the 100-percent waterproof (nitrogen filled) construction. Brightness and sharpness compared favorably with the best in the test, as did the nice and smooth operation of the easy-to-reach focus wheel. Like some others profiled here, one look through the lenses of these binocs and you'll see why we feel this newcomer should spell its debut: impressive. **Contact:** (800) 966-5692; www.kowascope.com



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