

Kowa delivers at last

Short and robust body is easy to handle

Twin focusing knobs allow both fast and general focusing

Large objective gives bright image that is sharp from edge to edge

Fixed and zoom eyepieces allow for variable viewing comfort



It's been a long time coming, but Kowa has finally updated its telescope line-up. **Mike Alibone** is the first to put the range-topping TSN-883 through its paces.

Review: Kowa TSN-883 telescope

THE KOWA OPTICS warship is on the move. Packed with an arsenal of new ammunition for 2007, the Japanese superbrand is seeking to regain its position at the top of the tree. Striving to become the best is no easy task, but with the launch of the TSN-880 series Kowa has clearly thrown down the gauntlet to challenge the Austro-German supremacy that has become widely recognised within the current optics market.

The TSN-880 range, unveiled along with the smaller TSN-770s at this year's British Birdwatching Fair, is the latest in a line of new scopes from Kowa and builds on the success of its predecessors in the popular and long-running TSN series. Four models in the range comprise two straight-bodied scopes (TSN-882 and TSN-884) and two angled scopes (TSN-881 and TSN-883), of which the 883 and 884 top the range. Both bear the 'Prominar' epithet and feature fluorite crystal lenses with new coatings.

With an 88 mm objective, this quartet has immediately earned the distinction of sporting the largest diameter objective lenses of any birding scope below 100 mm, which gives it a clear advantage in terms of light-gathering capacity. What may come as a surprise is the compactness of this range. Kowa has clearly pulled off a major coup in successfully shoe-horning a large objective into a relatively short body which, at only 329 mm for the straight-bodied version, is notably shorter than that of its nearest rival.

Would this new 'superscope' live up to my high expectations by delivering the ultimate image? After an initial taster at Birdfair, Kowa provided me with a TSN-883 for an extensive period of field testing – extensive because I found it difficult to put the scope down!

Straight to the image: excellent. Both the 30x magnification wide-angle eyepiece and the 20-60x zoom deliver pin-sharp images, although

that of the fixed magnification eyepiece is, not surprisingly, brighter. Yet the zoom also performs remarkably well and even at the top end of the magnification range the image is bright and still relatively crisp. Edge-to-edge sharpness is a feature of both eyepieces, as is the apparent absence of any peripheral curvature of field. Kowa has also done an admirable job in attempting to banish colour fringing completely; it can only just be detected in the outer 20-25 per cent of the field of view. At nearly 42 m at 1,000 m for the 30x magnification eyepiece, the field of view equals or exceeds that of other top-of-the-range scopes, and the zoom's field also measures up favourably on average.

A generally neutral colour cast contributes to the production of natural colour tones and I found the image contrast to be excellent. In poor light conditions both eyepieces returned startlingly good images across a range of habitats. The feather detail of distant roosting Eurasian Wigeon, seemingly illuminated on a suburban gravel pit, was still discernible just before dusk, for example, as were the subtle colour tones of a Black Redstart in the fading light of a late autumn afternoon.

The image passes with flying colours, but how easy is the scope to use? The magnesium alloy body appears robust and, weighing in at 1,520 g, it is not unwieldy; only the covering of the lens hood bears rubber armour. To attach one of the eyepieces you simply insert it and twist, and the internal locking device locks it securely into place, while to detach it you depress a quick-release button neatly recessed into the body. The eyepieces themselves are very user friendly, allowing variable viewing comfort by means of a baseline eyecup position that extends outwards to three additional click-stops.

There are two adjoining, concentric focusing knobs: the large diameter wheel allows you to fast-focus between 5 m and infinity within two

revolutions – although in general use I did not need to rotate this one to any great degree to achieve mid- to long-distance focusing – and the smaller knob is for general focusing. Both turn freely and easily and appear to be designed for use with the index finger (fast focus) and the middle finger (general focus).

For photographers, and to vary the viewing angle, the tripod foot attachment can be rotated through six different click-stop positions.

Accessories include a stay-on case made of a showerproof synthetic material that is padded and ribbed, and adaptors which allow existing eyepieces from the 600, 660 and 820 series to fit the new scopes.

This telescope offers almost everything: user friendliness, a large, light-gathering objective combined with a short body, an average weight (some are lighter) and an image that is apparently second to none. However, ground-breaking technology comes at a premium and, at over £1,500 for the body and more than £400 for the zoom, I suspect Kowa will struggle to compete effectively with the other top-drawer manufacturers in the optics market. 'Ascending to the Top', Kowa's new slogan, clearly includes price as well. But one thing is certain: Kowa is back – big time!

Tech spec

Price: £1,521.69 (body only)
Eyepieces: TE-10Z (20-60x zoom) £416.36; TE-17W (30x wide-angle) £238.99
Size: 343x103x112 mm
Weight: body 1,520 g; TE-10Z 325 g; TE-17W 320 g
Field of view: (m at 1,000 m) TE-10Z 38.4-18.3 m; TE-17W 41.9 m
Close focus: 5 m
Gas-filled: yes
Waterproof: yes
Guarantee: 10 years