

Accessories for the Active Birder

Although birding is my number one outdoor pursuit, I also very much enjoy hiking. I am always birding while out hiking of course, but I generally shy away from slinging a 77-millimeter spotting scope and multiple-pound tripod over my shoulder. Sometimes, some of us may not even want to carry 30 or so ounces of binocular around our necks. The backpacking mantra, “every ounce counts”, comes into play when we want to combine birding with rigorous hiking. Do I carry a walking stick? Do I want to have a full-size binocular swinging from my neck? What about a camera?—if I don’t take it, I know that Spruce Grouse will walk out onto the trail in perfect light a mere 10 feet away!

So, what is a hiker/birder to do? A few new products—among them the Leupold Katmai 6×32 binocular, the TrekPod, and the Nikon Prostaff ATB Compacts—may help those of us who sometimes take a more physically demanding approach to birding. Sometimes very useful niche products pass under our collective radar, so I will try to take a look at some of these from time to time—and this one is just in time for the holidays!



The 6×32 Katmais are light-weight, compact, and yet relatively bright, perfect as an “extra pair” or for those pursuing more physically demanding birding adventures. They come in a choice of colors; the “natural” is pictured here. Image courtesy of © Leupold.

The Leupold Katmai 6×32 Binocular

The Leupold Katmai 6×32 is a superb “extra” binocular. It fits easily in most glove compartments, or even cup holders. It easily fits in carry-on luggage or even in an everyday handbag. It’s perfect for hiking—when the hike is more of a priority than the birding—and it’s great for cycling and other activities in which full-size binoculars would get in the way.

“So are my compacts,” you say. But, these are not typical compacts. True compacts, even the best of the lot, are generally even smaller, and have extremely small lenses (I’m calling things with an objective diameter of around the 20–25 mm range “true compacts”). They often

have narrow fields of view and admit very little light. We birders like the size of the binocular, but not necessarily the size and brightness of the image. Until now we have not had a satisfactory option.

Enter the Leupold Katmai 6×32, a respectable compromise between size (and weight) and performance.

It weighs a measly 18.2 ounces. And when I first looked through this binocular, I was downright shocked by how bright it is. We are seeing a growing popularity in the mid-size 32 mm (objective lens) category, but here Leupold has made up for some of the light loss that occurs with smaller objectives. Instead of having an 8× magnification, this binocular magnifies the image by 6×. Simply put, by magnifying less, the instrument “eats” less light. Therefore, we do not lose as much brightness, color, or sharpness as we otherwise would. The field of view of 423 feet at 1,000 yards is excellent. The image is surprisingly crisp toward the outermost edges of the field of view, and the color is very “true”, especially compared to other offerings

in this price range.

Being waterproof, the Katmais are perfect for outings that involve some water, such as when we get caught out in the rain while on a long hike, or on a kayaking trip. Furthermore, I found when testing the

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Katmais while wearing eyeglasses that the 16.6 mm of eye relief and the wider ocular lens surpass the performance of a number of true compacts.

The close focus is an amazing 3.9 feet for me (in my test; the manufacturer's specification is 4.9 feet), perfect for a close-up look at a butterfly in a small patch of sunlight on the trail, or even at a dragonfly that alights on your leg while canoeing. I am happy to see a very good depth of field to the image, much better in fact than some of Leupold's full-size binoculars (such as the Olympics and Pinnacles; see *Birding*, May/June 2006, pp. 72–76).

I do have one complaint about this binocular. The focus wheel is fairly stiff and slow. Turning the wheel to focus on a warbler darting across the trail up ahead takes a little more time than I would like. Moreover, the slow focus and stiff wheel are cumbersome for young kids to deal with, and potentially frustrating to beginners of any age. I would also like to see some improvement in reducing the minimum inter-pupillary distance to increase this binocular's desirability for young birders (see sidebar, p. 87). These issues will not be a bother to some, but I certainly would like to see improvement here.

Nikon ATB Compacts

So, the Katmais aren't small enough? How about a truly compact yet fully waterproof binocular that doesn't cost an arm and a leg? Although the compact binoculars (20–25 mm objective lenses) offered by the likes of Leica, Swarovski, and Zeiss are optically fantastic for their size, they are not inexpensive. It is tough for most of us to justify the expense of a second or even third binocular that we would likely use only during times when a full-sized binocular is less desirable—when backpacking, kayaking, biking, etc.

Now, I will readily admit that I do not like looking through compact binoculars. The typically narrow fields of view, coupled with minimal light-gathering ability reduce the utility of compacts for birding. In some activities, however, such as kayaking, full-sized binoculars are simply not practical. Plus, it's certainly convenient to have a spare pair in the glove compartment for the commute to work, or to stash in a pocket while engaging in non-birding activities—just in case

we need to take a closer look at something.

Once again, Nikon has come to the rescue in providing a high-quality glass for a very reasonable price (minimum advertised price of only \$129.95). The ProStaff ATB Compact 8×25 binocular offers high-quality glass in a very compact body, and weighs a mere 12.5 ounces. The single biggest difference between this binocular and most other lower-cost compacts is that it is fully waterproof. I “accidentally” left them out in the rain and dropped them into a pond, just to be sure.

A field of view of 330 feet at 1,000 yards is very good, and a close focus of 9.2 feet (according to Nikon; I tested it to be closer to 7.5 feet) is adequate, unless butterfly watching is a significant interest. A 15.5 mm eye relief is also very good for a compact, and I have no trouble using these while wearing eyeglasses. The twist-up rigid eyecups are welcome, although the first time that I took this binocular out in the field, one of the eyecups fell off (luckily, Nikon's no-fault warranty applies to these binoculars). Although I was able to re-attach it, it was not stable, and often fell off again (one of the metal bearings that attaches to the eyecup had broken or fallen out). On a positive note, I am a fan of the right-eye diopter. First of all, it is fairly stiff, making it hard to move accidentally. Secondly, the threading audibly clicks as you turn it, allowing the user to know how much it is being adjusted—or



Even smaller than the Katmais, yet fully waterproof and surprisingly bright for their size, the Nikon ATB Compacts are a great product for the money.
© Derek Lovitch.

when it is being adjusted unintentionally.

As with most Nikon products, the depth of field is excellent and the glass is surprisingly bright for the price. Furthermore, the ProStaff Compacts sport Nikon's Eco-glass, which is produced without the use of lead and arsenic (see *Birding*, July/August 2006, pp. 76–78). If you are looking for a relatively high-quality, waterproof, but low-price compact binocular (I won't hold it against you!), then the Nikon ProStaff ATB 8×25 is the answer.

The TrekPod

Now that we have our binoculars taken care of, what should we do about the walking stick? Camera? And, what about a scope?

The TrekPod is a unique combination of a walking staff,

monopod, and—believe it or not—tripod. The lower 17” of the walking stick converts to a surprisingly stable tripod (see photograph, this page) when the user unfastens the Velcro strap that holds together the three legs.

There’s a comfortable cork handgrip, as well as a cork bulb on the top. (I have been told, however, that the cork, although not slippery when wet, can cause blisters.) The difference between the TrekPod and a typical monopod is soon evident when one removes the topper. Instead of finding a straight screw for attaching a camera, etc., you see a miniature, fully functional rotating ball head. A knob near the top of the staff is loosened to allow the user to manipulate the ball head. I do find this knob a little too small when wearing gloves, and the lack of a handle for moving the head (such as with a typical Bogen head) is something I have just not gotten used to. However, birders and photographers who are used to the full range of motion provided by a ball head will find this development to their liking.

Instead of a single set-screw as with a typical monopod, the user is provided with two magnetic quick-release plates (one heavy-duty, one lighter-duty) that attach to the ball head. I was impressed by the strength of this magnet: one for a scope, one for a camera, and both of them can be switched on and off in a split second. An attached clip snaps around the magnetic quick-release plate and adds some degree of stability for use with a spotting scope or longer camera lens.

The TrekPod extends to a height of about 62 inches as a walking staff, and about 59 inches as a tripod. The height is tall enough for most folks to use as a walking stick, but if you use a spotting scope with it, note that anyone over about 5’5” will need an angled eyepiece. Unfortunately for travelers, the two-section staff compacts to only 48”, not exactly convenient for packing (granted, a more compactable three- or four-section staff would reduce the stability and durability of the product).

As a walking stick, the TrekPod impresses me for its strength and sturdiness. It feels solid, has little give, and is lightweight. The Velcro-wrapped base legs are sturdy enough, which surprises me actually, even when an excessive amount of weight is put onto the staff.

So is this the answer for those long hikes up steep inclines to our favorite, off-the-beaten-path hawkwatching site? It would be nice to pack my scope in my backpack, and walk up the hill aided by a walking staff, leaving one hand free to use my binoculars. However, I’m not sure that this product is the answer. First, many of us would need to use an angled scope (not as popular with hawkwatchers). Second, we would need a very lightweight scope. Otherwise, we would run the risk of the whole thing toppling over, and we know that a scope always lands on the hardest, sharpest rock around. However, a lightweight

compact scope, or a low-cost “extra” scope will certainly work—unless there’s a little wind. (A helpful tip, by the way, for balancing a scope is to position the scope body directly above, and parallel to, one of the extended legs.)

Let’s face it: The TrekPod is nowhere near as stable as a regular tripod, and I have found that even in the lightest breeze the shake is rather noticeable. The vibration caused by a light wind is enough to make it impossible to follow a distant speck soaring in the azure sky. Also, despite using a lightweight scope (I used a 62mm Nikon Fieldscope for my trial), I never felt confident walking away from it. The center of gravity of the TrekPod with a scope is simply too high to prevent it from toppling over. Also, there is no way

to manipulate the individual legs to adjust them on uneven ground—which is usually what we find at most “unimproved” hawkwatch sites.

So, in my opinion, we’re back to hauling a tripod up the mountain (consider a lightweight tripod like the Manfrotto Digi-Tripod or investing in a carbon-fiber) if we want our scope at the hawkwatch to count emarginated primaries on a distant soaring buteo.

However, I think casual photographers (I’m a very casual photographer) will likely find more utility in this product. Using a large telephoto lens will result in the same top-heavy issues as when using a scope, but the balance of the system is even further thrown off when using a front-heavy camera lens. However, an SLR with a standard lens, or especially a point-and-shoot camera, works very well in those situations in which just a little extra stability (as compared



A unique feature of this combination staff-monopod-tripod is the fully-functional rotating ball head, allowing the user to alter the camera’s angle, such as on uneven ground. © Derek Lovitch.

to hand-holding) is needed. I think your panoramic sunrise/sunset shots from your favorite mountaintop would be greatly aided by a Trekpod instead of a monopod. If you have used a monopod for some time with success, then you should certainly consider the TrekPod for added stability and for the flexibility of the ball head. Unfortunately, this might be the apex of this product's utility. It looks like I'm still hoofing it with a full-sized tripod on my next climb to a favorite hawkwatching promontory.

The Perfect Binocular for Kids?

Small hands and small faces need small binoculars. However, many compacts do not offer the qualities (such as brightness, sharpness, field of view, close focus, etc.) of full-size binoculars. I urge parents of children who show an interest in birds to outfit them with something other than a \$10 pair of plastic-lens binoculars from a toy store. Nothing frustrates (or even hurts the eyes of) a birder—young or old—more than looking into a binocular with a low-quality image. Furthermore, a small



field of view will limit the ability to find the subject—the first challenge to bird identification. It's hard enough to identify the birds; let's make sure our birding prodigies can see them first!

Most full-size binoculars are simply too big for the faces and hands of small children—not to mention too expensive for something that may end up at the bottom of the toy chest with the rest of the passing interests. Lower-cost porro prisms are even larger, so much so that a child often has a tough time even reaching the focus wheel. And most binoculars do not have a small enough inter-pupillary distance for the smallest of faces.

I wonder what we would get if we actually designed a binocular with kids in mind? A small inter-pupillary distance

... good eye relief ... a large field of view ... light-weight ... easy focusing (or bring back the old Bushnell paddle!) ... a choice of colors. Oh, and I want them fully waterproof (and KoolAid-proof), but I don't want to spend more than about a hundred bucks. Impossible, you say?

Well, Leupold has done it. I warmly welcome the innovative new Yosemite 6x30s. They can be compressed to as little as 50 mm of inter-pupillary distance for small faces (but can spread out to 70 mm to fit most anyone else). Twenty millimeters of eye relief. A field of view of 420 feet at 1,000 yards. Weighing in at only 17 ounces, with a large focus wheel that is easy for small hands to manipulate.

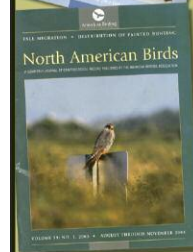
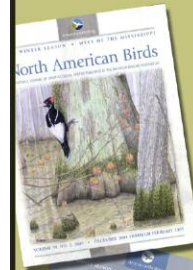
Most any budding young birder will find the Yosemite easy to use. In fact, the designer of this binocular developed it with his own five-year-old daughter specifically in mind. And, yes, there is even a choice of colors: black, dark red, and a sandy-colored "natural". Yet they are surprisingly bright for such a small package and they have an excellent depth of field. All this for only around a hundred bucks!

The 16.4-foot close focus could be better, but this is a porro prism after all. Although a porro won't take the beating that a roof can handle, the light weight and low cost of the design make these an optimal starter pair for the young birder. Finally! But don't get me wrong, this binocular is not "just" for kids—the Yosemite are more than good enough for the rest of us to "borrow" on occasion. Indeed, they are an excellent starter pair for any age, and a great value overall.

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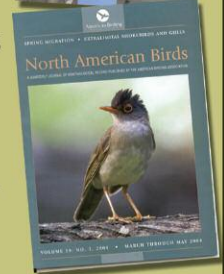
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