

The Return of Kowa



The TSN-883 and TSN-884 are the newest scopes from Kowa. Their “Prominar” fluorite crystal lens elements result in an amazingly crisp, clear, and bright image, even at high powers with the zoom eyepiece. *Photograph by © Derek Lovitch.*

It has been a while since Kowa Optimed made a splash in the birding world. What used to be one of the most respected names in birding spotting scopes has foundered under the weight of some recent poor and/or poorly received products. Clearly, Kowa took this as a challenge when the

Derek Lovitch

29 Woodland Road
Pownal, Maine 04069
columbarius33@yahoo.com

company got to work on the 880 Series of spotting scopes.

Although this line of scopes was introduced just over two years ago, it has recently begun to receive a lot more attention. My opinion is that birders, soured on previous products,

were simply slow to catch on. But, now, the bandwagon is moving—and I’m aboard.

Kowa has four different 88mm spotting scopes. The TSN-881 (angled) and TSN-882 (straight) scopes feature a “normal” lens. The TSN-883 (angled) and TSN-884 (straight) scopes feature Kowa’s new “Prominar” lens. The buzz has been surrounding this new Prominar glass, so that is what I have chosen to focus on. I have not reviewed the 881 or 882 models—except for quick peeks at a trade show—so I will not comment on

those. The only difference between the 883 and the 884 is the angle of the eyepiece, and I obtained an 883 for the purposes of this review.

It seems obvious: The more light that gets into a scope, the more that gets out (all other things being equal, of course). While that is absolutely true—for example, an 88mm spotting scope will be brighter than an 80mm spotting scope made of the same glass with the same coatings—there is also a tradeoff. Larger objectives require more metal to surround the lenses. More glass plus more metal equals more weight. Internal engineering requirements call for a minimum distance between each lens element, and therefore a scope with a larger objective is likely to be longer as well. However, Kowa has “successfully shortened the overall length of the scope while keeping a large diameter objective lens without sacrificing optical performance” by using a design that features five lens elements within four groups. Also, according to Kowa, the “adoption of an inner focusing system has made the prism box light and compact, and at the same time decreases the amount of image movement when compared to conventional prism

focusing systems.”

The new Prominar lenses in the 883 and 884 use fluorite crystals, as do many of today’s best optics. Lenses made with fluorite minimize chromatic aberration—the dispersion of different wavelengths of light that results in color fringing within an image. Kowa claims that the coupling of the Prominar lenses with glass that has “special dispersion properties nearly eliminates chromatic aberration.” The lack of chromatic aberration results in an image that is superior in color-truth, crispness, and clarity.

Sounds good to me, but let’s see what that translates to in the field.

I will readily admit that I hesitate to review spotting scopes. I find that most reviews of scopes are accomplished by testing various products side by side in controlled situations. That’s not my style. I prefer to review products out in the field, in not-so-controlled situations, as for example when the Lower 48’s first European Golden-Plover was discovered in Scarborough Marsh, here in Maine, in mid-October of 2008.

In a recent column, I lamented that I was running out of ways to say, “Wow, this is really bright” when writing reviews of new high-end binocular offerings, such as the Nikon EDG and the Leica Ultravid HDs. When I first took a look through the TSN-883, I muttered to myself, “Great, now I need yet another way to say, ‘Wow, this is bright!’ ”

But, yes, this is really an impressively bright spotting scope.

Simply put, the 20–60× zoom eyepiece is one of the brightest zoom eyepieces I’ve ever used. Even when zoomed up to 60×, the image remains surprisingly bright. Although there is certainly some loss of light (as there has to be), I was surprised by the brightness of this eyepiece at high magnification.

In addition to the excellent brightness, the overall image quality is exceptional at high magnification. Indeed, I have not previously seen a zoom eyepiece from any manufacturer that retains so sharp an image—

nearly all of the way out to the edges—at 60×. I believe that this is the absolute best zoom eyepiece on the market today.

In testing the Kowa, I found myself in a situation similar to when I reviewed the Zeiss T*FL binoculars (*Birding*, May/June 2007, pp. 72–74). I was unable to say enough about the brightness, vividness, and overall “pop” of the image. So, given my inability to come up with adequate superlatives to describe the image, I asked my bird walk group for assistance. With a Northern Shrike teed up on a nearby tree in perfect light, I asked folks to describe the image.

“Brilliant.”

“Exceptional.”

“Crystal clear.”

And, my favorite: “Revelatory.” You get the idea.

I am an ardent fixed-eyepiece user. Normally, my zoom eyepiece is relegated to the sidelines, only to be called upon in rare circumstances, such as a distant juvenile peep on a distant mudflat or a wacky first-cycle gull on a hilltop at a landfill. Simply put, I prefer the brightness and wide field



The 20–60× zoom eyepiece (left) may just be the best zoom eyepiece on the market at this time. The 30× wide (right), although excellent, does not significantly distance itself from other top-of-the-line eyepieces in its category. Photograph by © Derek Lovitch.



On the author's first outing with the Kowa TSN-883, this "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrow teed up nicely on a rugosa rose to provide a worthy subject for a digiscoping trial session. York County, Maine; November 2008; © Derek Lovitch.

of view of a fixed-power, wide-angle eyepiece. A wider field of view makes birds easier to find, especially when one is engaged in such demanding activities as hawkwatching and seawatching. Also, the exceptional brightness of fixed-power eyepieces aids digiscoping efforts. Bottom line: I simply find the wider, brighter image more enjoyable.

Therefore, I was genuinely surprised by how much I enjoyed using the zoom eyepiece when testing this product. If anything, I found myself preferring the Kowa 20–60× eyepiece to the 30×-wide eyepiece. That says something about the quality of the image produced by this zoom eyepiece.

The fixed 30×-wide eyepiece is hardly something to be scoffed at, however. It is also very bright. My feeling is that it simply doesn't impress me as much compared to other 30ish× eyepieces on the market. I do not find the field of view to be anything more than average, and the overall image quality is on par with some of the top offerings from other manufacturers. Don't get me wrong, it is an excellent eyepiece. But it just doesn't knock my socks off, as the zoom does. Kowa also offers a fixed-power 25× eyepiece with "extended eye relief" (see table, p. 75), but I did not review this eyepiece, as I feel that 25× is not quite powerful

enough for many birders' scoping needs. Happily, the Kowa body and the various eyepieces are sold separately, so you will be able to purchase the eyepiece that best suits your needs and desires.

Part of my problem with the 30× eyepiece is that the eyecup does not extend far enough for me, even though it is the same depth as on the 20–60× zoom (although the eye-relief itself is sufficient for me, both with and without eyeglasses). Simply put, it is just not as comfortable for me to use. A few of the participants on my Saturday morning bird walks also commented on this issue. I prefer to ram my face into the eyepiece for an added element of stability, but more importantly, I want to reduce the glare that occurs from light sneaking into my eye from the side.

With this eyepiece, I find that I have to hold my eye a few millimeters from the eyecup, which impacts my field of view and increases glare. This is not an issue with the 20–60× zoom, whose eyecup extends far enough for me to

use comfortably. With eyeglasses—and therefore with the eyecup fully depressed—I have no problem using either eyepiece.

Speaking of the eyecups, one flaw that I have encountered with both eyepieces is that the eyecup screws off too easily. Even when the user is aware of the problem, the eyecup loosens in the process of twisting it up and down. The problem becomes more acute when a group of birders is using the scope. Some users have eyeglasses; others don't. As each bird walk participant twisted the eyecup up and down, the threading that holds the eyecup to the eyepiece loosened, and soon the eyecup fell off.

Furthermore, I would really like to see a tethered lens cap for the eyepiece. The small plastic cap is easy to lose, especially if you are taking it on and off in the field, such as during rainy days. Piercing the lens cap, threading a string through it, and tying that string tightly around the ocular solves the problem, however.

The body of the scope is made from a relatively lightweight and very durable magnesium alloy. Kowa touts its "thixotropic" molding process as providing the strength and durability of a "traditional metal body." Weighing in at



The true test of a spotting scope is how it performs under low light conditions. This snacking **White-winged Crossbill** was digiscoped by the author using a Canon Powershot A550 hand-held to the Kowa TSN-833 with the 20–60× zoom eyepiece in poor light on a cloudy, windy day. *Knox County, Maine; November 2008.* © *Derek Lovitch.*

53.6 oz. (that does not include the eyepiece), the scope is on par with similarly priced offerings. But remember: This scope—with its 88 mm objective lens—has more glass than scopes in the 77–85 mm range.

Bells and Whistles

The 880 series of scopes all feature a dual-focusing mechanism. I never thought this feature was that big a deal, but the fine focus is definitely helpful for digiscoping. The quick (or “coarse”) focusing knob moves from the 16.4 ft. close focus to infinity in only two revolutions. The fine-focus knob allows you to dial in the crispest focus possible. If you’re a fan of dual-focusing mechanisms, you’ll like this Kowa scope all the more.

The eyepieces lock onto the scope body in a secure fashion, which is a nice contrast to several other products on the market. I do wonder, however, if the button that releases the lock can accidentally be depressed, allowing the eyepiece to fall off or accidentally twist off when zooming. Although I did not have this occur during the course of this review, I do think it’s worth keeping an eye on.

Kowa offers a “Lifetime Limited Warranty,” whereas the usual manufacture defects and problems are covered for as long as you own the scope, with the usual caveats. Damage caused by “misuse or improper handling,” etc. is not covered. I am also pleased to note that this Kowa product meets ROHS Directive standards to reduce the use of toxic substances in manufacturing.

Conclusion

This is not an inexpensive scope, but as is usually the case with optics, you do get what you pay for. As of the latest price update (31 January 2009), the Kowa scope is one of the more expensive scopes on the market. Once again, we see a case of the “law of diminishing returns.” To get just a little better, we have to spend a lot more. I think you will find that this scope—especially if you fancy a zoom eyepiece—is worth the money. And I’ll finish with my usual caution: Given that

almost all of the high-end products these days are so good, a lot of the decision-making will come down to personal preference. My wholehearted recommendation is that you give the Kowa TSN 883/4 careful consideration for your next optics upgrade.

The Scope Body			
	Angled 883	Straight 884	
Objective Lens Diameter	88 mm	88 mm	
Close Focus	16.4 ft.	16.4 ft.	
Length (not including eyepiece)	13.5 in.	12.9 in.	
Weight (not including eyepiece)	53.6 oz.	53.6 oz.	
Price*	\$2,310–2,475	\$2,310–2,475	
Eyepiece Options			
	20–60× Zoom	30× Wide	25× Long Eye Relief
Exit Pupil	4.4–1.5 mm	2.9 mm	3.5 mm
Eye Relief	17–16.5 mm	20 mm	32 mm
Field of View (feet at 100 yards)	115–55 ft.	125 ft.	110 ft.
Price*	\$595–640	\$345–370	\$345–370
*As of 31 January 2009. The lower price is the Minimum Advertised Price (MAP); the higher price is the Manufacturer’s Suggested Retail Price (MSRP). As always: Buyer beware if you see a price below MAP.			