

# Living Life (and Finding Life) Through Time's Long Lens

By Tom Bentley  
Photos by Brad Miller

*Brad Miller knows his way around a lens. The first thing he reached for on a table in his boyhood home was probably a camera—*





**PREVIOUS:** Brad Miller watches wildlife at sunset with spotting scope and binoculars. **ABOVE:** Miller's "camo" trailer, repaired with a vinyl camouflage pattern after a maple tree fell on it. **INSET:** The Miller family in their Fiat Jolly, brought back from the 1956 European Airstream Caravan. **OPPOSITE:** Brad Miller and his binoculars.

because cameras were as much a part of his growing up as food.

Cameras and Airstreams, that is.

Miller's father was Ardean Miller III, the photographic artist behind the brilliant and iconic '50s and '60s images of Airstreams in arresting natural settings. Wally Byam, Airstream's founder, knew Ardean Miller's gifts from early on, and for many years he provided him with new trailers to take to wild spaces and photograph. Those trips included Ardean's wife, Norma, and their three sons, Randy, Brad and Bruce. The family also made the fabled 1956 European Caravan—perhaps using as many miles of film as the miles traveled on the road.

All three Miller sons became professional photographers, says Brad Miller. "Mainly because Dad told us—and meant it—to stay away from his cameras when he was out of town. Of course, he unknowingly sparked an interest in all of us to discover (and break) some of his cameras. Dad eventually gave in, as he really couldn't stop us." Brad Miller now specializes in automotive photography, mostly with 8x10 Swiss or Deardorff cameras.



## How to Choose the Best Binoculars

By Ben Lizdas

Choosing the right pair of binoculars can be challenging for the uninitiated, because there are so many unfamiliar terms and concepts. What magnification (or "power") do you need? Is it important to think about optical terms like "field of view" and "eye relief," or should you be thinking more about features like durability, waterproofing, and accessories?

As a long-time birding enthusiast and a professional in the optics industry, I share these basic tips with people who are looking for their first good set of binoculars.

**1** When you buy premium optics, it only hurts once. Don't skimp on quality. Clarity, resolution, and detail make the viewing experience worthwhile and will be reflected by the cost of the optics. Do your eyes a favor and invest in an instrument that sharpens your senses.

These are tools designed to last a lifetime. With no electronics, no software upgrades, and (typically) a lifetime warranty, binoculars are one of the few things on the consumer landscape that you can use for decades without watching them wear out or become obsolete. High-quality binoculars will outlast your home appliances, computers, cell phones, and tow vehicle. So I recommend you only consider brands that have a strong track record for both quality and customer service and that have been in the business for a while.

**2** A good pair of binoculars should be easy to use. The mechanics should be precise and responsive, and they should be comfortable in the hand and easy to adjust. This is just as much a part of the optics' quality as the resolution and clarity that our eyes get to enjoy. I promise you, the easier a binocular is to use, the more you will see with it.

**3** Understand what the numbers mean. The first number in a binocular's size is the magnification ("power"). An 8x42 binocular will magnify an object 8 times greater than you can see with the unaided eye.

Keep in mind that the magnification has nothing to do with the binoculars' size and weight. Also, more magnification isn't always better. As you increase the power of binoculars, your field of view becomes smaller (making it more difficult to find and track moving wildlife), and they will be more challenging to hold steady. Stick with 8x and 10x binoculars for ease of use.

Birdwatchers who frequent wooded areas and are usually looking at objects within about 50 feet prefer 8x binoculars for their wide field of view. Hunters who are looking at larger animals, typically in open areas and at greater distances, tend to prefer 10x models. If you are looking for one magnification that fits almost all needs, I recommend an 8x.

**4** The second number (like the 42 in 8x42) refers to the diameter of the front (objective) lens, measured in millimeters. The bigger that number, the greater the light-gathering capability of the binocular. This is the number that will have an impact on how big and heavy the instrument is. Compact binoculars are great for portability, but they typically won't yield as much detail due to the smaller objective lenses. 30/32 and 42mm binoculars will be the most versatile.

**5** Avoid focus-free binoculars. "Auto-focus" binoculars can cause eye strain, as your eyes are left to do some of the work that a focus mechanism generally does. Another downside is that this style of binocular often can't be used to focus on objects within 30 feet or so, and there can be a whole host of wonderful things to explore outdoors within 30 feet of where you're standing.

**6** Don't forget tip number 1.

Finding the right binoculars will help you get closer to nature and see more of what this wonderful world has to offer. Binoculars are a great tool you can use at home, at spectator events—and certainly on your next Airstream adventure.





**INSET:** Sandhill cranes in dramatic flight in Titusville, Florida. **BELOW:** A farmer's pond near Cazenovia, New York, that is often visited by thousands of wildfowl.



Miller brought together his love of trailers, travel and wild places when he bought a '68 Globetrotter some years back, using it to camp and view wildlife in upstate New York. The trailer's unusual camouflage-patterned vinyl skin enhances its wildlife-viewing potential, but it came about by accident. A large maple tree fell on the trailer, doing serious damage, and Miller opted for the wrap rather than pay for a more costly repair job.

That budget-friendly choice turned out to be a boon for viewing birds in the wild. "The trailer became like a piece of stationary farm equipment that animals were used to," says Miller.

"I worked with farmers, staying near private ponds and marshes with no people around. There'd be thousands of geese and ducks. I'd sneak in there with my son, waiting for sunrise. Then, we'd be awake, and the windows would be open, and the birds had no clue that we were ever there."

Of course, Miller took many an image of winged things from the confines of his camo-blind, but he also developed his appreciation for simply witnessing the wild birds, an interest he had absorbed from his mother. With that birding appreciation came the interest in better optics to view the creatures zoomed in, in finer detail.

*"[Our father, Ardean Miller,] unknowingly sparked an interest in all of us to discover (and break) some of his cameras."*










# EXPLORE

Enjoying  
America's  
National Parks  
From Your RV

Discover the romance, fun and adventure

of exploring the US National Parks from the comfort of your Airstream. Bert Gildart and Rich Luhr bring you their decades of Airstream travel experience in this spectacular collection of photos and firsthand accounts. Their stories and images will inspire and prepare you to begin visiting the 400+ National Parks yourself.

\$19.95 [store.airstreamlife.com](http://store.airstreamlife.com)

Also available from Amazon.com



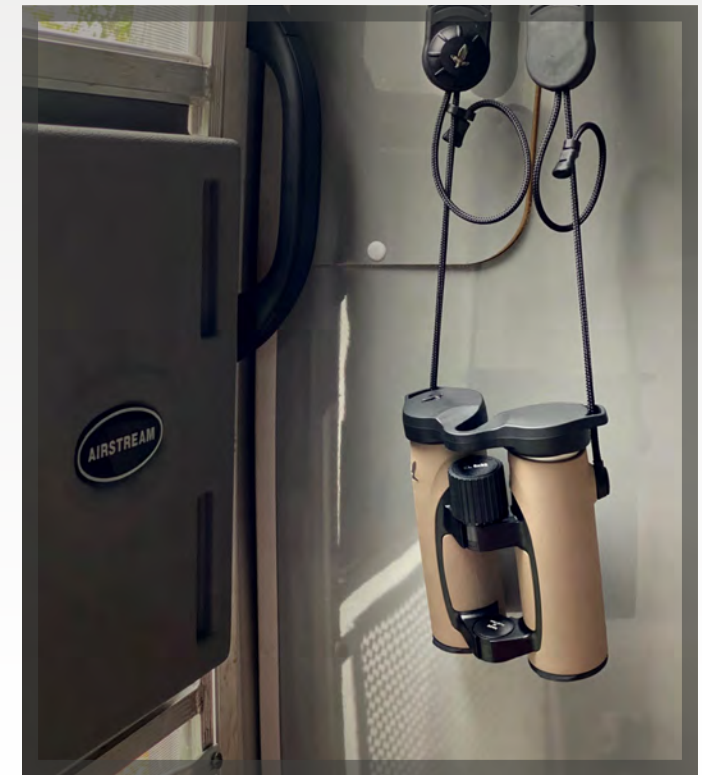

“I’m an optical-crazy person,” says Miller. “I’ve used Leica, Zeiss. I always strive for the best possible optics. I couldn’t just have a regular lens—it has to be the best I can get. Then I saw some Swarovski binoculars at a birding show in Titusville, Florida—which is really a mecca for bird watching. I looked at all the brands, and these just were head and shoulders above anything else: small, lightweight, easy to use, and beautiful to look at.”

Miller bought the EL 8x32 model and loves them. “With these, every little bit of a bird’s feather is very sharp. You can look at things like butterflies you could never before see with detail because you couldn’t get close enough.”

Miller keeps his binoculars hanging on the coat hook nearest the front door in his 22-foot Airstream Sport (this one with the standard aluminum exterior), and he rarely goes out without them. He’s currently parked just a half-mile from the water in Stuart, Florida, so many of his mornings are spent walking to the water and observing the marine and shoreline animals.

The binoculars have impressive optics, but when Miller really wants to take in a scene, he brings his spotting scope and tripod. The scope brings long-distance scenes into his lap.

“I could look four miles away and count the people in a boat, very clearly,” he says. “I’m finding the binoculars really wonderful, but for somebody sitting at their campsite and looking far down the valley or up against a waterfall, the scope is very practical.”



**OPPOSITE:** Florida Mottled Ducks on a pond in Palm City, Florida. **ABOVE:** Brad Miller’s Airstream Sport home in Titusville, Florida, which displays his attentive landscaping. Miller’s binoculars hang at the ready in his Airstream doorway.






The spotting scope (a Swarovski ATX 25x60-85mm) ain't the pull-out pirate telescope you got at Christmas when you were six years old. Quality scopes can retail for upwards of \$5,000; the Swarovski binoculars can set you back by a couple of grand as well. But for an "optical-crazy person," they are the bee's knees. (And you can see the bee's knees with them.)

"These devices enhance my outdoor experience in my Airstream travels in a way not even photography can," says Miller. "They bring things to you. As a guy who understands and appreciates unparalleled quality and being able to see like an eagle, these are the best."

How can you argue with a guy who won second place in a duck-calling contest? Miller was the caretaker of a posh club on Florida's Pumpkin Key some years ago that had a "duck night." He came in second in stiff competition. "The time spent in the Airstream gave me an inside perspective of how ducks communicate. You learn how to talk like a duck: There's a call for 'come back' or 'I'm lonely down here,' or 'come and check this out.'"

Miller is a man of many interests: he collects vintage eyeglasses and vintage birding books, and he's an expert on the unusual Kentia palm, native to Australia's Lord Howe Island. And he knows a lens like no other. We're sure he'll never lose his Airstream after he's wandered over the Florida beaches—with his trusty binoculars, he can easily zero in on the telltale silver glow in the distance. 

# Colin Hyde Trailer Restorations

## Airstream & Vintage Airstream Refurbishment & Restoration

- ▶ "Body off" reconstruction
- ▶ Sub floor replacement & repair
- ▶ Plumbing & electrical
- ▶ Cabinetry
- ▶ Chassis upgrades
- ▶ In-house axle replacement or "drop ship" anywhere
- ▶ Sheet metal repairs & custom work
- ▶ Complete Interior Design Services
- ▶ Vintage Airstream restoration consulting service: via phone, email or on-site

**The only northeast Airstream restorer to offer "rotisserie" body off and chassis reconstruction services!**

*Colin Hyde* WBCCI 1936, VAC member, TCT member, TAC member, "Panel Pro" on the Vintage Airstream Podcast ([www.thevap.com](http://www.thevap.com)) for eleven years, owner of Colin Hyde Trailer Restorations [www.colinhydetrailerrestorations.com](http://www.colinhydetrailerrestorations.com)



Tel: (518) 566-4400 • 63 Trade Road • Plattsburgh, NY • [colin@colinhydetrailerrestorations.com](mailto:colin@colinhydetrailerrestorations.com) • [www.colinhydetrailerrestorations.com](http://www.colinhydetrailerrestorations.com)