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—
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.

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1. 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.

2. As a general rule, binoculars that are smaller than 8x magnification (like an 8x21) are good for portability, but they typically won’t yield as much detail due to the smaller objective lenses. Binoculars that are 7x50 (or higher) are good for use in low light conditions.

3. Every binocular model comes with a lifetime warranty. Binoculars 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.

4. 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.

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6. A good pair of binoculars can be your ticket to a whole new world. Binoculars are a great tool you can use at home, at spectator events—and certainly on your next Airstream adventure.
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.”

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.
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“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 Swarowski 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.”
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.