

## SEEN & HEARD...

### Canon 10x42 L IS WP binoculars

A recent review of binoculars (see December 2006/January 2007) was somewhat dismissive of Canon's image-stabilised models. This was largely due to the panel being given an unsuitable model to review for birding purposes. The image-stabilised (IS) range comes in a range of magnifications from 8- to 18x. Until recently, these haven't been designed with birding in mind, and were handicapped by inadequate close-focus distances (more than seven metres in our test model), small exit pupils and rather narrow fields of view. The 12x36 model reviewed previously suffered from all these problems, but Canon have come to the party with a 10x42 model which provides serious competition to the top-of-the-range binoculars.



In terms of optical statistics, Canon's 10x42 compares favourably with the marque 10x42s from the big three, having similar eye relief and exit pupil diameters. Closest focus distance is around 2.6 metres, not as good as Zeiss but better than Leica and similar to Swarovski. The field of view is slightly wider than all three (6.5° rather than 6.3°). But these statistics don't prepare you for the amazing optical quality of the Canons. The ultra-low dispersion glass and field-flattener lenses offer true edge-to-edge sharpness, visibly exceeding the best efforts of the European manufacturers. Image brightness is at least as good as the top-of-the-range models, as is colour rendition and flatness of field of view. There is little evidence of any chromatic aberration, less than any other binoculars I have used, and limited flare, on a par with the best. They set a new standard in optical quality, scoring 6 or more relative to the 5-star optics of traditional market leaders.

If Canon delivered this level of optical quality in a conventional roof-prism design, I have no doubt that they would sweep the top-end birding market. But the inclusion of their vari-angle prism, image-stabilising system makes the

10x42 binoculars substantially larger and heavier than their competitors. Even without the two penlight (AA) batteries used to power the IS system, they weigh more than a kilogram (20-30 per cent more than the competition), and fully equipped come in a shade over 1.2 kilograms. The design of the solid body takes some getting used to. Compared to the 12x model, the focus wheel is better placed, with the IS button offset to the side, but the wheel remains rather small and is set far back on the body. It also requires a lot of turning to move from infinity down to the closest focus distance. The design of the eye-cups needs revising, as they are too wide and distinctly uncomfortable during protracted use.

Is image stabilisation worth the extra weight and the hassle of having to carry batteries? It is crucial for photography, where image quality is paramount, but the human visual system is remarkably tolerant of imperfections, and is designed to extract pattern from clutter. Having said that, there are times when it makes a real difference, particularly in dim light or windy conditions. The IS system is pretty heavy on batteries, especially at low temperatures: Canon

claims about 2.5 hours of continuous IS use from a set of alkaline batteries at 25 °C, but this falls to only 10 minutes at -10 °C.

The binoculars are supplied with a reasonably comfortable neck strap, rain-guard and objective lens cover, as well as a practical zip-up nylon case. Most of the body is rubber armoured, and appears quite robust, but it remains to be seen how these more mechanically complex binoculars stand up to rigorous field-use. There is no doubt they are waterproof, however, as Canon recommends soaking them in water for a couple of hours if you get them covered in salt water!

It is a judgement call whether the extra optical quality and IS capability is worth the increased weight and rather uncomfortable design. But if you're in the market for top-quality binoculars, you can't afford to ignore the Canon 10x42. If nothing else, they will force other manufacturers to sit up and take a critical look at their optics.

PETER RYAN

Recommended retail price: R14 999 (incl.)

### RememBird Digital audio recorder/player

Have you ever found yourself in a bird party, surrounded by unfamiliar species, desperately trying to scribble down notes or memorise what you've seen, while keeping your eyes on the action? The RememBird may be what you need. It is a pint-sized digital audio-recorder/player which allows you to record notes or play back pre-recorded calls, while also providing a facility for recording birdcalls.

As small as a compact cellphone and triangular in cross-section, the device is intended for mounting onto roof-prism binoculars. It is also fitted with a wrist strap to keep it close to the action even if you choose not to fit it to your binoculars.



The device can be mounted to fit neatly onto roof-prism binoculars, making it readily available to use.

Once the device is powered up, voice recordings are activated simply by pushing the 'Notes recording' button, and releasing it when finished. If an unfamiliar birdcall is heard, it can be captured through a separate, higher-gain microphone by pressing and holding the 'Birdsong recording' button. Recordings are made at 44 kHz, adequate for the highest of pitches, and birdsongs are saved with a lower MP3 compression ratio than the voice recordings in order to maintain recording fidelity. Songs do, however, have to be loud to be recorded adequately, and the manufacturer acknowledges that this is not primarily designed for recording birdcalls. Once recordings have been made, they can be reviewed by earphone (included), with navigation by means of a small joystick control.

The device has an on-board memory of 32 MB for notes and recordings, which can be supplemented through removable MMC memory cards. The recorder on test had a pre-recorded database of birdcalls of Europe and North Africa on the MMC card, alphabetically sorted, and these could be navigated using the joystick with the help of simple audio voice prompts, and played back through the earphones or speaker. Although initially awkward and rather tedious, this became easier with practice. Databases of local birdcalls will no doubt become available for this device.

A software package is included to manage recordings on your PC, providing simple but effective access to them, using icons to distinguish calls from notes. Recordings can be accessed by date, location or species and are presented chronologically. Provision is made for subsequent annotation of recordings or notes with comments and species details, as well as location details, observers and weather. Recordings can be trimmed to retain only the desired portions, and can be exported as MP3 files.

Quoted minimum PC requirements are MS Windows 98SE, ME, 2000 or XP, USB1.1 or better, 128MB RAM and 100 MB free disk space, and each hour of voice notes will fill 7.5 MB of your hard drive. Power is supplied by a single AAA battery.

Although this device won't satisfy those searching for high-quality recording equipment, it provides notebook-free field notes and accessible pre-recorded birdsongs for reference or playback, and should become a familiar and useful accessory in birders' kitbags.

JOHN GRAHAM

Available on order from the UK. Prices are £195 for the recorder, plus £5 postage. The Audio Field-guides sell from £40. For more details, visit [www.remembird.com](http://www.remembird.com)