

review

Swarovski CL Companion binoculars

I'm often asked, 'What binoculars should I buy?' and my response is 'How much money do you want to spend?' Few would argue that Leica, Swarovski and Zeiss (to list them alphabetically) make the best binoculars, but not everyone is able or willing to pay R30 000 to R40 000 for a pair of binoculars. Many other brands offer models that are very close to the 'big three' in terms of performance and quality, for a fraction of the price. As the quality gap between the market leaders and the rest of the pack has narrowed, the competition for market share has increased and budget-conscious birders are spoiled for choice.

The big three have responded by bringing out less expensive models for about half the price of their top-end binoculars. Zeiss has probably been the most successful; its Conquest range is great value for money and has done so well that Zeiss has also targeted the budget end of the market with its Terra series. Leica and Swarovski have revamped older models at less eye-watering prices; Leica has redesigned the Trinovid series and Swarovski the SLC series.

The big three also offer compact binoculars – tiny binoculars that are small enough to slip into your pocket. Despite featuring pretty good optics, they are seldom considered as first choice binoculars by birders because of their limited field of view and their ultra-small size, which makes them awkward to use for extended periods. Only Swarovski offers binoculars that bridge the gap between full-size (32–50 mm objectives) and compact (20–25 mm objectives) in their CL Companion series, with 8x30 and 10x30 options.

The Companion series has been around for almost a decade but was re-launched in late 2017 with a raft of significant design improvements. I was loaned both models over the festive season break and chose the 10x30 to field trial because it is more likely



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to suffer the two main problems associated with a relatively small objective diameter: poor performance in low-light conditions and a limited field of view.

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My next decision was what strap to use. The new Companion has three strap/bag options: Wild Nature, Urban Jungle and Northern Lights, which have to be bought separately. Wild Nature is probably the most practical for birders (at least in Africa) and it is the cheapest, but at a little over R2000 it still adds about 14 per cent to the price of the binoculars! The Companion has adopted Swarovski's new rotating 'quick release' strap attachment, making it difficult to use a third-party strap or harness. I found the rotating attachment a bit annoying, because if the

Swarovski's CL Companion binoculars fit comfortably in your hand.

strap became twisted it was difficult to straighten again. And as I never change my binocular strap, I found it to be a needless complication.

Another slightly annoying feature was that the rain guard was stiff and set wider than I use binoculars, so it didn't naturally rest over the eyepieces. To secure it in place you have to press it firmly onto each eyepiece, which prevents it from falling off when your binoculars are stuffed in your pack, but requires a tug to free again, costing precious fractions of a second while birding in the rain. The binoculars also come with objective covers that attach with rubberised rings, like the old EL series, but I didn't bother with these.

The first thing that strikes you when you use the CL Companion is how compact and light it is. At a shade under 500 grams, it weighs 20 per cent less than Swarovski's EL 10x32 and a whopping 70 per cent less than the

EL 10x42. Despite its small size, it fitted perfectly in my hand – even better than Swarovski's open-hinge design. The focus action is smooth and responsive, with the large focus wheel ideally placed and very easy to use. It is quite possible to hold and focus with one hand, should the need arise.

The optics are first rate. Some reviews of the old Companion series complained about softness around the edge of the image, but this isn't a problem with the new models. I also had no trouble using them in low-light conditions. The field of view (108 metres at 1000 metres) is 10 per cent narrower than the EL 10x32 (120 metres – the same as my Zeiss 10x32 Victory binoculars), but I soon got used to this slight handicap. Interestingly, the field of view is only slightly less than the much larger EL 10x42 (112 metres). If this is a real concern, you can consider the 8x32 model, which has a more generous 132-metre field of view. My main concern was the modest close focus distance (three metres), which is sub-par for modern binoculars. That

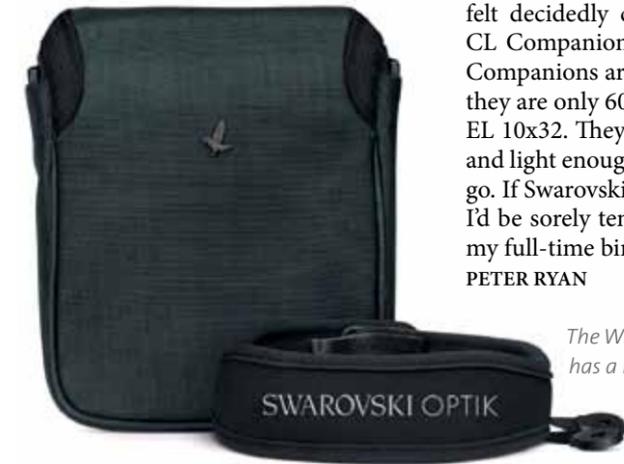
said, the only time I struggled with this was when looking at insects.

Build quality has been substantially improved. Like the top-end Swarovskis, these binoculars are nitrogen-filled and waterproof to four metres. The old aluminium and polycarbonate chassis has been replaced with a stronger and lighter magnesium housing. I used the loan pair for three weeks and had no qualms

about subjecting it to the full range of birding rigours. Another advance over the old model is that the dioptre adjuster has been moved to the centre of the focus wheel (not on the right eyepiece) and now locks in place.

It was with considerable reluctance that I finally packed up the CLs and reverted to my own binoculars. I've always valued my Zeiss 10x32s because they are so small and compact, but they felt decidedly clunky compared to the CL Companion. At about R19 000, the Companions are not a cheap option, but they are only 60 per cent the price of the EL 10x32. They are aptly named – small and light enough to take everywhere you go. If Swarovski improve the close focus, I'd be sorely tempted to choose them as my full-time binoculars.

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The Wild Nature accessory package has a high-quality neoprene neck strap and a rugged carrying case.

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