Meopta MeoStar S2 HD Angled / 20-70x: *A Review*

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In 2016 I reviewed Meopta's S2 Angled, paired with its 30-60 WA wide-angled eyepiece and was so impressed by it that I made a note to revisit this model along with the alternative 20-70x eyepiece at a later date. My opening remarks in the previous review introduced Meopta for the benefit of those unfamiliar with this company so if you wish, go to: https://www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=326146 .

Time flies by and it was only recently that I was able to return to this instrument and to take it on an expedition to North Uist in the Western Isles of Scotland to stretch its legs in some of the wildest landscapes and seascapes of the United Kingdom. As always with my reviews I am not concerned with how close the instrument comes or does not come, to optical perfection, but I do want to know whether one can make useful and enjoyable nature observations without any optical short-comings getting in the way and causing distractions.

In the UK market this scope/EP combo is priced at around £2,221 which looks very competitive with Leica's 82mm APO Televid with 25-50x at £2,495 and Kowa's TSN 883 25-60x at £2,549, especially given the Meopta's wider zoom range of 20-70x. In the USA the Meopta combo is retailing at around $2,500 while the Leica is priced at around $3,548 and the Kowa at $3,150, which makes the Meopta very attractive indeed in this market.

On field of view there is nothing to separate these models at the lower end of their magnification ranges with both the Meopta and Leica listed as 41m at 1,000m at 20x and 25x respectively, and with the Kowa listed as 42m at its 25x. At the high magnification end the Meopta, with its 70x is specified at 16.2m while the Leica (50x) and Kowa (60x) come in at 28m and 23m.

Meanwhile, weight-wise, the Meopta is a light 1767g, but the Leica is a lot hunkier at 2175g and the Kowa, somewhat skinnier than the Leica at 1890g.. Of course opinions vary about the significance of the weights of spotting scopes due to varied opinions regarding the burden of carrying the scope/tripod versus the steadiness of the scope when it is mounted on the tripod.

Getting totally subjective for moment I do think the S2 is a very handsome instrument and it is a pleasure to handle and use. The focus wheel encircles the whole body where it narrows and gives terrific control with its large diameter. At first the focus wheel was a little jerky when making tiny adjustments but the more I used it the more it smoothed out and by the time I was using it for serious observations on North Uist the action was completely smooth and the gearing was a fine balance between speed and controllability. I know some folks prefer small diameter focus wheels, such as on my old Diascope 65, but I did enjoy using the large-diameter wheel with my first finger on top and my thumb underneath for large movements and my other two fingers resting on the scope body providing a kind of stabiliser for my hand while making very fine ones.

The 18mm of eye relief was fine for me with or without spectacles, and panning showed no trace of rolling ball when the scope was either focused or defocused. I noticed some rolling ball in 2016 when panning this scope when defocused and paired with the 30-60 WA eyepiece, but none at all when panning and focused, hence the check on both conditions with this eyepiece.

On arrival at our rental holiday cottage I set up the scope and tripod and at 20x began a sweep of the opposite bank about 0.62km / 500yds away and the detail in the lichens on the rocks there was staggering and knocked my first-generation Diascope 65 off its perch and into last week for optical excellence. Roosting Lapwings were beautifully presented and a Common / Harbour Seal

that would become a regular visitor, hauled out on a rock and doing their 'banana-posture', had the most intriguing warm brown mottled colouration that the scope vividly brought to life.

I will say now that I think this scope is absolutely world-class in its optical performance. A minute amount of chromatic aberration is only visible at the extreme edge of the field of view and then only in the very highest contrast situations, and if you optimise your eye position it is difficult to see. For all practical purposes this combo is CA-free and so sharp and contrasty, with such natural colours, that it regularly took my breath away.

One such occasion was when I was scanning a big sea loch that we know well, for Otters. These Otters are regular European Otters, not the Sea Otters off the west coast of North American which are not only a different species but a different genus. When the water is somewhat rough, what we would call 'choppy', it can be difficult to spot them. Shadows running along the sides of moving waves can look like something swimming or diving, and even separating Otters from Seals in such waters can be tricky at longer distances. But as I panned around with my binos I glimpsed a dark shape in the sea and it was near a seaweed-fringed skerry (group of rocks) and so ideal Otter-foraging habitat. As I watched, the shape dived and I glimpsed an uplifted tail so it was an Otter not a seal. Switching to the scope which was set to 20x I easily found the place by reference to the shape of the skerry.

Typical Otter dives in this habitat last around 15 seconds and on schedule an Otter burst up out of the sea for half her length, having clearly surfaced from a decent depth and acquired a good deal of momentum coming up. As luck would have it the scope was perfectly focused and as she slipped back down into the water she twisted her body to shake her head and the scope picked up the shower of bright droplets as they scattered. But there was a second shape just behind her and just a bit smaller: a cub! The mother was chewing a small fish and holding her head high to prevent too much water going in her mouth and as she twisted around to eat the fish, for one instant she looked straight in my direction. In magnificent detail I glimpsed her pale cheeks, the tiny ears and the fan of whiskers. She had the narrow, pretty face, one expects of a female, males being a bit Churchillian with a wider face and definitely more gravitas. The cub was clambering all over her in its excitement but Mum dived immediately she had finished eating and I had to wait for her to reappear.

When she did it was a very differently. She did not breach this time and immediately settled low in the water and began swimming towards the shore, dipping from time-to-time under the surface to use her entire body undulations to swim more efficiently, with the cub frantically trying to keep up. I could see silver in the mother's mouth and knew from this behaviour she was taking a larger than average catch to shore to eat. Probably she would allow the cub to eat some too. I believe these Otters do this with a larger prey item to fuel the swim to shore and back in order to get out of the sea to warm up, as they don't have blubber like seals, only their fur, to keep them warm. As they reached the shore they disappeared behind the rocks and that was the end of the sighting. I will not easily forget the view through the scope as the mother breached out of the water, it was magnificent.

That was not the only Otter sighting through the scope but you birders will be getting impatient to hear about birds and I was delighted when, over the same sea loch on a different day, came the cackling calls of two Red-throated Divers/Loons as they flew down to fish in the big loch. They are

familiar birds for us but we never tire of hearing and seeing them. One began preening as soon as it splashed down, rolling to preen its belly and twisting to preen its mantle and wing coverts.

Through the scope, the throat patch was a brilliant splash of red and the black and white stripes up the back of the neck gleamed like freshly printed bar-codes. What gorgeous birds they are. In the distance there was a commotion on one of the islets and a tilt of the scope took me into the action. Two Grey Herons were stalking among the shallows, pausing with their necks stretched out and standing motionless for minutes at a time. One of them paused to straighten up and look across the loch in my direction. They say that owls look wise and its true but I think Grey Herons do too. The black on the back of the head extending into the crest looks a bit like an old quill pen stuck behind its 'ear' and they have an expression both wise and quizzical. It was a thrill to observe even these familiar birds through the S2.

Best of all though, a little later a large-winged bird glided over the ridge on the north shore of the loch and swooped down to perch on a rock. My 8x bins showed it was an eagle but was it Golden or Sea? Switching to the scope, the 20x mag allowed me to easily locate the rock and zooming in I could see a decent-sized tail as it shuffled on the rock and as it turned its head I could see a normal sized beak: Golden Eagle! And looking at our Ordnance Survey map later I used the scale to find the distance to the rock and it was 1km or 0.62 miles.

Summing up, the Meopta S2 with the 20-70 or 30-60 WA eyepiece is a first class piece of kit and a bargain at its current retail prices. I really enjoyed the 30-60 WA eyepiece when I reviewed this two years ago but I think I favour the 20-70x for the large dynamic zoom range it offers, and the 20x was useful when heat-haze made the use of higher magnifications problematic. Both deserve auditioning to find which one suits you most, but if you can afford it, how nice it would be to have the choice of both. Anyone looking for a scope in this price range is recommended to try this beauty out.