

*Zeiss Conquest HD 15x56 vs Swarovski SLC 15x56:
A Review
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03/06/2014

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Background

Most people on Bird Forum seem to agree that Zeiss's Conquest HD line delivers tremendous value for money so I was intrigued when the 56 mm models were announced. A Conquest HD pumped up to 15 x magnification and 56 mm objective lenses? Seriously?

This Conquest HD is Zeiss's first 15x56. For many years Zeiss sold a magnificent 15x60 porro then there was a rare Victory Mk I 12x56, and more recently a Conquest 15x45, but no 15x56, so this model is making a bit of history.

Why compare Conquest with SLC? Zeiss's own HT 54s aren't available in 15 x and differ in objective lens size, as does Swarovski's EL 50 mm Swarovision, which anyway employs Schmidt-Pechan prisms. The only other 56 mm Abbe-Koenig prism-equipped premium binoculars available to compare with the new Conquests is therefore Swarovski's SLC. So here are two of the most extraordinary binoculars I have encountered in over 40 years of birding and nature observation. Of course, my findings were discovered with my eyes and just one unit of each model. Feel free to pick up other units and, using your own eyes, come to your own conclusions.

Price and Specifications

First, the question of price, which might make some folks think this is not a fair comparison because, while the Conquest retails at \$1600 / £1265, the SLC, at \$2500 / £1700 weighs in at \$900 / £435 more expensive, based on USA and UK dealer prices. However the Conquest comes with a tripod adapter included. Pay out for one of these must-have accessories from Swarovski, and the price difference increases to around \$1,050 / £515. Serious money! I will return to this subject at the end of the review. Note that the Conquest's adapter is not the old 'strap and cradle' type but a new, quick-release design.

On paper there is not much to separate SLC from Conquest. The Conquest has a slightly wider field of view with 240ft at 1,000 yds versus 234 ft whereas the SLC hits back with a slightly lower weight at 42.3 ozs against 45.7 ozs. The weight difference of 3.4 ozs is about the same as half a banana, if you were wondering. The Conquest also focuses a little closer, coming in at 11.45 ft with the SLC managing 12.8 ft. The situation regarding eye relief is a curious reversal of what in recent years has been normal between these two brands: the Conquest has 18 mm and the SLC 16 mm.

Impressions in the Hand

Beauty is notoriously in the eye of the beholder, and in the past I think you could say Swarovskis have been the pretty ones and at best Zeiss's have been 'workmanlike'. This changed dramatically when Zeiss introduced the new look that enhances HT, Conquest and Terra. Both Conquest and SLC carry their considerable dimensions with grace and poise.

In the hand both of these instruments are beautifully finished, and lovely to handle, but the first surprise is that the SLC feels heavier, which it actually isn't. This is because the SLC has more of its weight near the objective lenses, which is very noticeable when you grab them near the focuser. The Conquests are better balanced for a quick 'grab and view', although for extended viewing, with

both units it's better to move your hands a little away from the focusing position towards the objectives to get the balance right.

Lifting them up to the eye the Conquest settled into my hands easily and comfortably whereas the SLC has thumb cut-outs at the back that had me fidgeting, searching for the best grip. In addition the SLC's faux-leather texture armour felt a bit slippery while the Conquest's smooth armour felt comforting and secure. Wearing gloves, both handle well and the fidget caused by the SLC's cut-outs disappears.

Eyecups and Accessories

Both units have good eye relief and I had no blackout problems with spectacles or without. The eyecups of the SLC screw upwards then settle down into their detents, in a smooth, luxurious fashion. You can't say this about the Conquest's which feel unsophisticated, but are stiff enough to be left in-between the detents, thus offering a more accurate personal adjustment for some folks. This is impossible with the SLC's as they are so easy to move unless in the detents.

Similarly, with the rain-guards, the SLC's are very efficient at both placement and removal, which is not something one can claim for the Conquest's. This is too flexible for its own good and is a fiddle to place and remove, although the deep-cup design means that when in place, you could leave your bins in the rain without fear of water creeping into the eye-cups. I am not a fan of objective covers but tried them out and found once again that the SLC's were a better design and stayed on more securely.

Focus Wheels

The heart of all binoculars is the focus wheel and both of these have a lovely feel. They are both smooth with no slack / free play, the SLC's being just a little stiffer. On paper the 2 full turns from near to far would seem to put the SLC at a disadvantage compared with the Conquest's single rotation, but the slowness makes itself known mainly when re-focusing from extreme close-up to far distances. In normal viewing from medium distances to infinity, the SLC works fine, needing just a bit more rotation than the Conquest. However, if you plan to frequently use your 15x56's in hides (blinds), in nature reserves or national parks, to observe the birds and animals that approach very closely as well as those that pop up briefly in the far distance (for example shorebirds close by, then a briefly visible Marsh Harrier or Bittern over distant reed beds), you may find the SLC's focuser frustrating and the Conquest is probably better suited to your needs. Setting the dioptre was a cinch with the SLC but harder with the Conquest's stiff to rotate wheel, but neither moved from their settings in use.

Chromatic Aberration and Glare

With the units on a tripod, viewing horizontal black cables and a vertical pole against a pale sky revealed that both have small amounts of chromatic aberration (CA) that is better controlled by the SLC. Note critical focusing was required to assess the CA as the tiniest inaccuracy of focus exaggerated it. In normal viewing I rarely encountered CA with either, even watching dark chocolate-brown Swifts against pale clouds, but I did notice it with both units when viewing white Mute Swans against dark water. It turned out that my eyes were not aligned with the optical axis and re-aligning them eliminated the problem. Watch out for this when using a tripod as it can be so tempting just to swivel the bins and then contort yourself to see through them, rather than re-

position the tripod. Aiming both units as close to the sun as I dared, I could not see any looming veiling glare, but I did not push my luck to the limit on this.

Optical Performance

To assess optical performance a wide variety of subjects were viewed with the units on the tripod. These ranged from tree trunks, houses with black timbers on white backgrounds, open moors and woods, to hang-gliders, garden birds, moorland birds, ducks, geese, swans, and sheep. Some of the aspects of these targets that revealed the units' ability to reveal detail included tiny patches of lichen on the branches of trees, facial patterns and horns of sheep, the colours and shapes of distant hang-gliders and the details of Hawthorn blossom. But birding is where I began my nature observing so I will concentrate on two examples of what I experienced with birds as my targets.

I had just set up the binoculars on the tripod when a Yellowhammer landed in a Hawthorn only a short distance away, carrying a beak-load of green caterpillars. It perched at a height level with me, for about half an hour. Both binoculars revealed subtle details of its head-markings with equal clarity although the yellow on its head and the green of the caterpillars were definitely just a touch livelier through the Conquest. After a time the Yellowhammer turned around to face away from the gentle breeze which first ruffled and then lifted up the tiny feathers on the nape of its neck. As the feathers lifted, the breeze caught the tips and slightly spread them like the opening of tiny fans. Both Conquest and SLC captured this fine detail beautifully.

On another occasion a male Mallard began up-ending only a short distance away in a pool of spring sunlight. The ripples on the water sent corresponding ripples of light zithering along its flanks, illuminating the subtle details of feather structure there. Both units revealed this wonderfully. When the sun really shone on the duck's head it shimmered from metallic green to purple as it turned to face this way and that, and the droplets of water on its back sparkled like gems. This entire picture was just a bit more alive and vivid through the Conquest with the green and purple more saturated and the sparkle of the droplets had a little more magic.

To my eyes the Conquest consistently delivered images that were just a little more lively and vivid than the SLC. Whatever the technical explanation is, it was clear to me that Zeiss has worked a little bit of extra magic into the view and delivered blacker blacks, whiter whites, punchier colours and highlights with just a bit more sparkle. But don't let me exaggerate or give the wrong impression, I am not suggesting that there is a night and day difference between them and the SLC is not a dull binocular by any stretch of the imagination. Looking through them separately, with a couple of minutes in between, I would describe the views as similar, however a side-by-side comparison revealed the small but noticeable step up in 'liveliness' to which I refer. The binoculars were evenly matched when it came to the rendition of fine detail and try as I did I couldn't trip either of them up into revealing a weakness in this respect. Nobody is going to be disappointed with their abilities.

As an inveterate 'subject-centring' observer the question of which has the larger 'sweet spot' is not an issue that concerns me much, but to my eyes the sweet-spots of both units were much the same size and that means almost edge to edge. However a surprising finding was that Conquest's 2m extra at 1,000m and

6' at 1,000yds, was actually quite noticeable, something that I had discounted prior to field-work.

Summing up

This has been a fascinating experience and it needs a conclusion, a judgement, if you will. The advantages and disadvantages of these two superb instruments are mostly finely balanced in my opinion, and to come down strongly in favour of one or the other becomes more a matter of personal taste rather than incontrovertible fact. If you need a 15x56 as your main instrument both of these models deserve auditioning, and if you need one for special purposes only, having put your main investment into another model as your primary pair, then the Conquest can meet your needs at a very competitive price point. In my case I would favour the Conquest's highly competitive optics with their slightly livelier and wider view, together with its handling and focusing advantages and included tripod adapter, against the SLC's advantage in chromatic aberration control, easier dioptre adjustment, weight and much better quality accessories.

Choosing

However, one fact cannot be escaped, and that is the question of price. Since these instruments are so evenly balanced the saving of \$1050 / £515 is a powerful argument in favour of choosing the Conquest You could pocket the saving and fuel your car for a considerable number of birding miles or buy yourself a Conquest HD 8x32 with which to travel light. For this reason Conquest HD is my winner and the one I would take home.