

*Zeiss Victory SF 8x42 vs Swarovski EL 8.5x42 Swarovision:
A Review
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3

Contents

	Page
Background	3
Prices & Specifications	3
Inter-pupillary Distance Range	3
Impressions in the Hand	3
Eyecups, Accessories	4
Focus Wheels	5
Dioptre	5
Optical Performance	5
Handling & Field of View	6
Summing Up	7
Choosing	7

Background

When Swarovski introduced the EL in 1999 they set the cat amongst the binocular market pigeons and soon became top dog in the sales charts, and the more recent EL Swarovision and well-respected SLC line have kept them there. Zeiss has cruised along in second place but is now fighting back with an ambitious strategy of a three-tier product portfolio consisting of the Terra, Conquest and Victory lines, a refreshed, sleek and graceful family-look of all mainstream Zeiss binoculars, and more relevant to this test, they have split the premium Victory line in two and launched the HTs and SFs, with their very different optical systems, to compete against Swarovski's EL and SLC. In this test I will take a close look at the SF 8x42 and EL 8.5x42.

Price and Specifications

At the time of writing, the retail prices (not list prices) in the UK, European Union and USA pan out like this (but please don't blame me if your local prices vary from these):

Swaro EL SV 8.5x42: £1765, €2.450, \$2530
Zeiss SF 8x42 : £1950, €2.475, \$2600

Taking a look through the specifications we find several points of difference. For example SF weighs 780g / 27.5oz, which is a little lighter (by about the weight of 1/3 of a banana) than the EL which scales at 835g / 29.5oz. On the other hand the SF is 173mm / 6.8in long and so is a little longer (by about 1/3 the length of a wine-bottle cork) than the EL at 160mm / 6.3in. Eye relief for SF and EL is 18mm and 20mm respectively, and both have a closest focus distance of 1.5m or a gnat's whisker under 5ft.

So far, so very even, but the difference when it comes to field of view is startling: 148 m at 1km / 444ft at 1,000yds for the SF, and for the EL, 133m at 1km / 399ft at 1,000yds. How important the SF's field of view advantage is for you will depend on the kind of birding or nature observation that you do, but reflect on this. At 1,000 metres the SF's field of view comprises 17,206 square metres compared with the EL's 13,895 square metres and whether you stick with these metric measurements or do the same calculation using feet and yards, the SF has a 24% larger area field of view whatever the viewing distance.

Inter-pupillary Distance Range

Zeiss has had a good record for providing a wide IPD range with, for example, both 8x42 FL and HT allow 54-76mm IPDs, so it is disappointing to note that the SF drops back to 55-76mm and the Swarovski only manages 56-74mm. If manufacturers want to attract the broadest possible market for their products they need to make sure they fit the broadest possible range of people.

By the way, anyone who has a narrow IPD like me needs to take care when closing the Swaro's IPD down to minimum as there is not much space between the barrels for your fingers and you can trap them. The SF has a little more space down there.

Impressions in the Hand

Does the appearance of binoculars matter? Well, we prefer our cars, watches and cell phones to look attractive rather than hideous so the answer must be

yes, even though we might like to say that what is important is how they perform. In fact we want both performance and great looks at the same time. In my opinion both of these instruments look terrific but certainly some folks don't take to Swarovski green and probably some will not like Zeiss grey.

Picking them up brings a surprise because the Swarovski feels rather heavier than the Zeiss although it isn't that much heavier at all. The reason SF feels so much lighter can be found in the internal arrangements of the optical components with the SF having been designed to position as much weight as possible near the eyepiece end and reduce the weight of the objectives. At first this claim was viewed with scepticism by some but you can easily feel this in the hand and the accompanying pic of a sectioned SF and EL show how this difference has been achieved. I will return to this when discussing experiences in the field but for now will just note that I have seen people's faces burst into a spontaneous grin of pleasurable surprise when being handed an SF for the first time as a result of its well thought-out balance giving an immediate impression of lightness.

The EL's armour feels rather unyielding but this is not at all unpleasant in the hand, while the SF's is just a touch softer and has been selected for the impact-absorbing ribs on the underside.

Eyecups and Accessories

The eyecups on both models work well but I have to say that those on the Zeiss are only 'good enough' and on a product with this price tag this is not good enough. I am referring to the Zeiss only having one position for both spectacle and non-spectacle wearers (and a redundant position halfway between) and to the eyecups having a small amount of rotational free play in the click-stops, whereas the Swaro has two stops in both positions and feel precision made. The SF and EL are the binocular equivalents of Mercedes' premium S-class saloon in which everything is super-adjustable and has a super-premium feel. Binoculars such as SF priced at a premium level need eyecups with a similar level of adjustability and premium feel.

Both rain-guards work well, the Zeiss ones in particular working much better than those on the Conquest 15x56 I tested last year.

The cases provided are of a similar 'clam-shell' design and what I am going to say next will have Zeiss and Swarovski banging their heads against a wall: the Swaro case is too big and the Zeiss a little too small.

I will clarify that by observing that the Swarovski case is big enough to get a note book in, a lens brush and cleaning cloth. And probably your entire weeks' grocery shop. This makes the case useful if you carry kit like that around but on the large side if you don't.

Meanwhile the case supplied with the SF has been accused of not being able to accommodate the bins with the eyecups screwed up, but I have demonstrated on a different thread that this is just not correct. The case will accept the bins with rain-guard and objective cover in place, with the eyecups in the up position and the strap folded alongside (not in front or behind) and all without having to use force to close the zip.

Certainly the SF case would be a little simpler to use if it was 1cm / 1/2in bigger in all directions but it has actually been designed to the smallest dimensions so that it can be used out in the field, perhaps under a jacket and certainly on a belt or shoulder strap. Instead of carrying the SFs around your neck or on a harness you have the choice of threading the case onto your belt or using the shoulder strap, and with the zip totally undone you can slip your bins inside, keeping them safe by closing the magnetic strap, and still be able to whip them out in an instant to catch sight of that Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

By the way, for those who find that the magnetic strap gets in the way when drawing or holstering the bins, just fold it over and push the tip down in between the body of the case and where the base of the strap is attached. It will stay there until you need it.

So the two cases are designed the way they are for very good reasons and these may or may not appeal to you.

Focus Wheels

Both units have smooth focusing actions with a slight unevenness in effort required in different places during the full travel of the wheel. However this is only noticeable when fiddling about sat in an armchair. Out in the field this is just not an issue. Both units are really praiseworthy for the smooth precision with which they focus.

SF stands for 'Smart Focus' which refers to the positioning of the focus wheel where your first finger does not have to be canted over to reach the wheel (unlike on the EL), and for a faster focus than the EL and also for the non-slip covering on the wheel. I will return to this subject when discussing my experiences in the field, but for now I will just say that the Smart Focus features and the revised weight distribution do add up to very useful improvements.

Dioptre Adjuster

Both were easy to use and the setting stayed reliable throughout the fieldwork.

Optical Performance

Over the period of the test I made use of a wide variety of subjects to help assess the optical performance of these two big-hitters, including, amongst others, a range of geese (and their discarded feathers), ducks, swans, finches, swifts, the occasional dragonfly, coloured towels on a washing-line, a red-stone church, deep green pine trees and rows of brightly coloured cars.

There is no getting away from the fact that these are well-matched instruments, both absolutely superb, and for perceived sharpness I couldn't slip a cigarette-paper between them. After viewing the feather textures on various waterfowl and finding that both bins showed the same level of detail, I resorted to a critical examination of the structure of feathers removed by the geese during preening. These discarded feathers were situated at various distances from me, so were ideal targets. First I looked at contour feathers and their side-vanes, then I moved on to down feathers with their wispy nebula-like plumes and for perceived sharpness the Swaro and Zeiss just kept pace with each other.

Neither of them are *as sharp* at the edge as they are in the centre, but don't let anyone tell you that either of them is *not sharp* out there. Both of them showed

the fine side-vane details of a duck's mantle feathering right out to the edge of the field.

Both SF and EL seem immune to chromatic aberration except at the very edge of the field of view where a tiny amount can be provoked by peering at the field edge to work out how sharp it is, although I suspect this is probably exaggerated by inadvertent tilting of the bins sideways and so looking through them off-axis.

Glare is well controlled in both and I didn't encounter it even during the sunny and quite un-British summer weather during the test work. I especially looked for it in the SF with its extra-wide field of view. However, none of my field testing was done in early morning or late afternoon with a low sun, so I wasn't able to assess the units under these conditions.

When glassing convenient arrays of brightly coloured towels on a washing line and a row of parked cars that were several shades of reds, greens blues, silvers and greys, colour rendition by both instruments was the same, according to my eyes, and they performed similarly when comparing all of the subtle shades of tones on waterfowl, vegetation and buildings.

Handling and Field of View

Picking up the ELs for the first time, they have a reassuring heft, but after using the SFs they just feel clumsy. If you try to grip around the barrels, you find out how limited is the space between them and with your thumbs firmly in the recesses at the back, your first finger needs to be angled to reach the focus wheel. These shortcomings can be easily overcome by bringing your focusing hand up towards the eyepieces. You can then reach the focus wheel without finger-bending, but the further you do this the more your thumbs aren't in the right position to utilise the recesses and this leaves the weight of the barrels and objective lenses relatively unsupported. After a time I noticed I was shifting my hands down the barrels again as my view was beginning to lose steadiness.

Just explaining that in full makes it sound more complicated than it actually is and none of this would add up to much if it wasn't so very different with the SF, which I could grip easily, was so well balanced, and which I could hold more comfortably and more steadily for significantly longer than the ELs. I suspect that this advantage would be even more marked in windy conditions, and although these didn't arise during field-work, I am very confident about this. In isolation the EL feels OK and I certainly never felt that my own EL in the early 2000s handled clumsily, but after putting down the ELs and picking up the SFs the contrast in handling is obvious.

This sort of handling improvement might sound insignificant but it actually reminded me of some people's initial reaction to autofocus when it was introduced on SLR cameras years ago. Many said: 'we don't really need that' but today who would want to be without it? I feel the same way about the SF's handling.

The speed of focus of binoculars is a question to which there will never be a perfect answer because different situations and different peoples' dexterity demand different solutions. I will just say that SF got me onto middle-distance

Swifts, then back onto a finch perched nearby, and then onto far away Swans more quickly than did the ELs, and without over-shooting the point of focus.

The SF's wider field of view is very noticeable in the field and is great for more easily acquiring a target or just for letting your eyes roam around. The 24% larger field of view will be significant advantage to those searching the skies for birds of prey, or on a sea-watch looking out for migrating sea-birds or whales, and scanning lakes or the sea for re-surfacing ducks, loons, otters or whales. Those who look through their bins only long enough to find a target for their 'scope and for whom the handling characteristics of SF may seem of limited utility, will surely value the extra-wide field of view when scanning for targets. At closer distances this extra field of view gives you a better chance of acquiring a nearby fast flying warbler or butterfly or dragonfly in your bins, and the faster focus is great for this too.

The EL also has a lovely 'roam-able' field of view but returning to it after looking through the SF you are acutely aware that your eyes can't roam as far.

Did I see any rolling ball / globe effect? No, I didn't detect this in either of the test units despite much panning, but I am not susceptible to it.

Summing up

It has been a privilege to handle and assess both of these lovely instruments and I can't imagine anyone being disappointed by either of them. So much of how we use binoculars and how we prioritise their features and capabilities, is so very personal that I can only tell you what works for me. It is up to you to decide what works for you.

Choosing

Neither of these bins is beyond improvement but they both achieve an extremely high standard of professional-grade performance. To appreciate the differences between these two superbins you need to ensure you get as much time with them outdoors as possible and with a big view to look at, containing subjects both near and far to focus on. Only then will you be able to make an informed choice.

The SF is my winner because, in addition to its superb optical performance, it gives me three tangible benefits that the EL does not. It gives me a bigger view every time I look through it, so in this sense I get more of what a binocular is for, and with its handling and balance I can enjoy the view and scrutinise birds and beasts more steadily and for longer periods of time, while the faster focus / wider field of view combination gets me onto more subjects, more quickly.