

*Opticron MM4 77 GA / ED 45 with  
Opticron SDL v2 18-54x Zoom &  
HDF TWW 20x:  
A Review*


*By  
Lee Thickett*



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I was intrigued by the 77mm format of Opticron's recently launched MM4 spotting scope, and Opticron were good enough to loan a test unit to me to take to the Western Isles of Scotland and specifically to the island of North Uist. This island, and the many adjacent ones, has great contrasts between the west and east resulting from the different soils, and also the shallower sea off the west coast compared with the plunging depths off the east coast. It is a rugged landscape with hundreds of islands and islets and skerries (low groups of rocks not big enough to be called 'islets') crowding the sea and with the land equally punctuated with lakes and ponds of every size called lochs, if they are big enough, and lochans if they are smaller. It is a land of spectacular birds, flowers and animals and an ideal testing ground for using spotting scopes for the purpose for which they were designed: nature observation and birding. As always my goal is to find out if this scope, with these eyepieces, can deliver useful and enjoyable birding and nature observations and of a quality in keeping with their price.

When we received the test unit Troubadoris was startled by how compact it is, because she had been expecting something closer to an 82mm scope, but in stature it falls neatly between an 82mm and a 65mm. See the pic below with a Meopta 82mm at the top and a Zeiss Diascope 65 at the bottom. Checking on the internet I struggled to find other 77mm scopes being offered on the market although I did find a 77mm Pentax 'Alder' (surely a misspelling of the German word Adler, meaning 'eagle') but which at £150, was way too different from the Opticron's price of around £950 including the zoom eyepiece. Leica used to offer a Televid 77mm, but today markets a more conventional 65mm and 82mm pair. It seems that Opticron have found an unoccupied niche and have sashayed into it.

At 1529g (53.93ozs) total, the 77mm MM4, plus the SDL v2 18-54x zoom, is light enough considering that Swarovski's 65mm ATX 65 comes in at 1585g (55.90ozs). For sure, I had no problems toting it around.

One thing that I very soon noticed when I began using the MM4 is that there is a definite offset between the optical axis of the eyepiece compared with that of the objective. This is due to the prism housing containing porro prisms that not only deliver the image the right way up, but are also moved to achieve the focus. I did not find this offset affected my ability to aim the scope at all and soon forgot about it. The MM4 balanced nicely on the tripod and was a pleasure to handle. The two focus wheels, one for fast-focusing and the other for fine adjustments, worked very nicely. Neither of the eyepieces gave eye relief problems whether used with the naked eye or (more usually) with my spectacles. There is a medium-hard rubber cover for the objective lens that is tethered to the body of the scope and this works well as it never gets lost or put in a pocket that *never* gets used for caps and is the last place you would look, although I did find it distracting when it flapped in the wind and I could see it with my open left eye. I am not skilled in viewing through scopes with both eyes open and soon abandoned this technique. But this is a minor point and I am sure any owner could deal with this easily and simply if they also found it a distraction while viewing with both eyes open.

As well as the zoom eyepiece already mentioned, the scope came with a HDF TWW wide-angle eyepiece with a fixed 20x magnification. Testing for chromatic aberration using a black overhead cable pole against a white sky and also the black cables themselves, this eyepiece exhibited no chromatic aberration in the centre field and only a very tiny amount at the edge. The zoom had a very small amount in the centre field and a tiny bit more at the edge.

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So enough of this, let's get out in the field and see how this combo performs. By the way the distances quoted are all approximate and based on Ordnance Survey maps of the islands.

While setting up the scope and tripod on my first day in the field with it, my attention was caught by a flurry of gulls 400m/1300ft away from which came much calling and squabbling. I had the zoom on the scope and at around 40x was able to see that a Great Black-backed Gull (these a big powerful birds) was attacking a Red-throated Diver/Loon and stealing its fish each time it surfaced. In fact to avoid the attentions of the many Common Gulls that were mobbing it, the Great Black-backed did a semi-dive and grabbed the fish from the Diver under the water. The light was not good at this stage and the red throat of the Diver was a dark mark, rather than the intense red it can be in bright sunlight, but after a few dives the Diver clearly decided enough was enough, and as the sun came out from behind the clouds and I pushed the zoom to 54x, it stretched out its neck to take off and I could see the thin black and white 'bar code' stripes on the back of its neck.

The gulls soon dispersed after the departure of the Diver and as they did so I heard a tern calling and searched over to the east for it and there it was, quartering the loch with its head facing down, looking for fish about 400m-500m/1300-1640ft away. Fitting the fixed magnification eyepiece, I quickly located it in the field of view and the smudgy dusky tones of the outer primaries identified this as a Common Tern.

While observing the tern I noticed a seal loafing on rocks 375m/1230ft away. Panning back to the seal I could see from its profile that it had the brow and doggy-face of a Common Seal rather than the smoothly curved 'Roman Nose' of an Atlantic Grey and using the zoom at 54x I could make out its whiskers and 'eyebrow' hairs.

All-in-all it was a creditable effort and the only thing I would ask for would be an increase in the field of view to make searching a little easier. But this is where the fixed magnification eyepiece steps in. At 58m @ 1,000m the field of view is significantly more than the zoom's 37m to 24m @1,000m, and being noticeably brighter and, to my eyes, a bit sharper and a bit more contrasty, it makes a good companion for much of the time. I would always want this fixed magnification eyepiece as a partner to the zoom.

In fact on one day while searching the opposite bank about 700m/2300ft away of a large sea loch with the fixed magnification eyepiece, I spotted deers' ears sticking up from behind a rise, and when swapping to the zoom as the deer moved away I could see it was a mixed group of Red Deer.

By the way, Opticron's eyepieces attach by screwing rather than using a bayonet attachment with a button-release. I am undecided about the best method, as the screw arrangement takes longer, which can be an issue if there is rain or dust in the air, but on the other hand some bayonet attachments of my acquaintance have had release-buttons that have been reluctant to release their grip on the eyepiece, leading to frustration and bad language.

Several days later I had the good fortune to happen on an adult male Wheatear and a juvenile of the year about 25m/80ft away, and the zoom rendered the juvenile's mottled breast and pale tips to the lesser wing coverts accurately, as well as the delicate and subtle grey of the adult's mantle. What beautiful birds these are.

A few days of rain followed the Wheatear sightings but the weather broke again and I decided to give the scope a shot at picking out some small details at significant distances. The first was a Herring Gull at 550m/1800ft and twisting the zoom up to maximum I could clearly make out the red

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spot on the lower part of its bill. Somewhat closer at 400m/1300ft was a Grey Heron standing patiently in the shallows. It was an adult with a lovely long crest hanging down the back of its neck and I could see the long slender black tip quite clearly. Similarly the long feather tips hanging down from the mantle and wing coverts were very nicely reproduced. Grey Herons are common enough birds in the UK and especially around the shores of the Scottish islands and west coast mainland but it is easy to forget how decorative they are.

So, how to sum up the MM4 77mm? It is compact and lightweight for a 77mm and handles really nicely, being balanced on the tripod, and having well-engineered fast and slow focus modes. The two eyepieces make excellent companions for each other and the only thing on my wish list is a bit more field of view for the zoom. But really, this is a very nice set and well worth auditioning.

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