

*Review of Kowa BD II 6.5x32 XD
By Lee Thickett*



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I wasn't sure what to expect when I picked up one of these at this year's British Bird Fair, having only recently become acquainted with the view through a 7x bino, but the huge field of view was intriguing to say the least, and led eventually to this review.

However, perhaps I should first deal with the 'elephant in the room' and that is the question of the magnification. It may be that some members are thinking 'can a 6.5x binocular be useful for anything serious?' And my answer to this will be a resounding 'yes', but those with 'magnification-anxiety' should keep in mind that there was a time when Zeiss's Dialyt 7x42 BGAT* was the premier 'serious' birding bino on the market and this Kowa is only 0.5x shy of this magnification, which itself has a steadfast following among Birdforum members.

Looking around the market place, 6.5x roof prism binoculars are a bit of a rarity to say the least, Meopta's MeoPro having been discontinued, leaving Viking's SG model (with a very unhelpful 6.0m close focus) and the much more expensive RSPB 6.5x32 HD (at around £480 versus the Kowa's £360) which is also significantly heavier. Minox's BD model is ruled out by its individual focus and Leupold's Yosemite 6x is a porro as well as being slightly adrift on magnification.

The Kowa's particular claim to fame is its field of view at a faintly staggering 10deg/175m/525ft/65deg AFOV. If you measure value for money based on the amount of the world you can see through binoculars, then the 24,056 square metres field of view at 1,000m promises great value indeed.

Looking at the Kowa on the shelf alongside a few other models and it is immediately recognisable as a Kowa with the same green armour as their more famous Genesis 8x33 and a metallic-looking focus wheel that Kowa Japan, via Kowa Optimed in Duesseldorf, assures me is aluminium, as is the one on the Genesis. Unlike that model the wheel is silvery in colour as opposed to the Genesis's dark grey, and the cap on the wheel carries the company logo and other information in a very high-quality print on embossed letters, giving the whole display a 3D character. In company with the aluminium focus wheel, and aluminium endcap on the hinge, these, to my eyes, gives the model a quality appearance well above its asking price. It is a handsome model and is really quite short and compact. For example while Swarovski's EL 8x32 is 138mm long, Meopta's MeoStar is 123mm, Leica's Ultravid HD Plus is 119mm and Zeiss's FL 8x32 is 117mm, the Kowa sneaks underneath them all at 116mm, or about 4.5 inches long. Take a look at the accompanying pic of the BD II next to the Genesis 8x33, which is 133mm long, and you can see the difference in length.

As for weight, the Kowa comes in at 535g or 18.9ozs, and for comparison, Leica's Trinovid HD 8x32 weighs 650g and both the Viking and RSPB models, mentioned above, weigh 600g. So the Kowa is compact and light, attributes I found useful in urban settings if I wanted to tuck the Kowa out of sight under my jacket to be more discrete. I will return to its urban uses later but for now will consider its optics and its abilities for nature observation.

For a start, the BD II's chromatic aberration control is at a very high level indeed and with my eyes carefully placed on the optical axis I found only the very slightest of traces at the extreme edge of the field of view. For all practical purposes this bino has no CA. The sweet spot of the huge field of view is about 60% after which there is a gradual softening of the image caused by field curvature. Nudge the focus wheel a little towards infinity and the field edges come into focus, so if any movement at the edge attracts your attention, a slight movement of your finger is all that is needed to see what caused it. Perceived sharpness is excellent and the colours almost neutral to my eyes, with just slight favouring of blue. However this is nothing to be concerned about, and quite possibly assists the quality of the view in the twilight, but more of that later.

Now, how did it perform in the field?

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Let's look at birding first. At short distances of, say, 15m or so, I found myself lifting them to look at a single bird in a flock perched in trees or bushes and being able to see half the flock as well as the chosen individual. Plumage details on Blue Tits and Chaffinches were easily discernible, and while I know it is sometimes nice for a shallow depth of field to isolate a single bird from its background, I did find the depth of field and reduced telephoto-compression added greatly to the feeling spaciousness, and placed the subject nicely in the context of its habitat. On the Isle of Islay an immature Oystercatcher, with its neck collar easily visible, made an attractive subject at about 30m and later the same day, a Curlew flying low and directly overhead gave a superb view of the markings on its breast, secondaries and primaries. It was a gorgeous checkerboard of intricate markings and a huge piece of luck, but not as huge as the luck that delivered a most unexpected subject a couple of days later.

I was washing dishes at the time and glanced across the hill to the corner of a dry-stone wall about 130m away and my eyes nearly bulged enough to knock my spectacles off my nose. The nearest binoculars happened to be the Kowas and they revealed a superb view of a Golden Eagle perched on the wall. Golden head, pale patch on the coverts, longish tail, and just so whopping big with a capital B! We have never seen one perched so close and of course if we had been outside and it had seen us, it wouldn't have been perched there at all. Well, the Kowas captured it beautifully, its plumage like a Scottish autumn hillside with more tones of brown than you can imagine, and did I mention how big it was? When the sunlight glanced on its golden head, for a moment it looked like it was on fire, and then it was gone, lazily powering over the hill, and disappearing behind a ridge.

Now, here came a nice surprise. Rather than the 6.5x magnification resulting in a smaller image than I would like, looking a bit lost in the middle of a huge field of view, the eagle stood out from the background due to the depth of field and reduced compression, and floated across the view looking absolutely in context and the right size, within the overall image. In fact the distances both behind it and in front of it were so discernible, I almost felt as though I could reach out and put my hand into the space behind the eagle. Yes, I could just have said this was due to the '3D', but that wouldn't have done justice to the tangible spaciousness of the view.

What about smaller birds? While walking along the shore one day my attention was grabbed by a glimpse of startling yellow in the distance, where a few Ringed Plovers were exploring the stranded seaweed. Stepping to one side a little to get a different angle the Kowas found me a Grey Wagtail, doing exactly what the Ringed Plovers were doing. These birds have an elegant grey mantle but under the back of the belly they have patch of intense yellow. Normally they frequent running fresh-water, and there are a few streams (called 'burns' in Scotland) like this nearby, but this individual was well away from these, something we have never seen before. Its yellow belly stood out like a neon light as it moved over the dark seaweed.

Many times during our visit, I got the chance to view Brown Hares at close and medium distances, mostly during twilight conditions, and once again the optical characteristics, with good transmission of blue light, delivered very pleasing images of these animals, their facial and ear patterns being visible even as the light got dimmer and dimmer.

After several days like this I realised that at no point had I ever wished for a higher magnification, and as we explored our local coast in greater detail the Kowas got used for more purposes.

For example when we were searching for the many and varied fungi, some of which had the appearance of regular mushrooms, while others were tiny and more like sticks of ebony or pasta, I found the Kowas invaluable for scanning quite big areas of grassland and rocky outcrops quickly and efficiently. I think they would be brilliant for surveying for small flowers in sensitive habitats such as bogs and wetlands too. In addition, Islay having some of the most intriguing and ancient rock formations in the world, the Kowas were great for gazing at large areas of volcanic dykes and twisted strata, and thinking about the eons that these rocks took to journey across the globe, from Antarctica to where Scotland is today.

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Away from the coast, I carried the Kowas and used them as a tourist might. For example in the town of Bowmore I used them to look at the architecture of the round church there. Round? Yes, the church is perfectly circular. Why? So that there are no corners in which the devil can hide! I wished I had had these binos with me when I visited Paris, Munich and Torino on business so that I could have looked at the architecture of the many fine buildings there, and gazed through them at views from high points over those cities such as from Montmartre looking across Paris. In fact they would have been great for viewing Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe as the Dialyt 10x40BGAT* I had with me was fine for birding, but not for capturing panoramic views.

I also took them into the Outback Art Gallery at Sanaigmore to look at paintings there. Anyone who has visited an art gallery will know that the authorities do not encourage you to touch the artworks even if all you want to do is to admire the brushstrokes, and the security staff only relax when you stand further away. I did this in the gallery, taking advantage of the close-focusing distance, and found that, despite the close distances, the wide field of view allowed examination of decent sections of the paintings and the texture of the canvasses, papers and boards that the artists had used, as well as the brush strokes and oils-textures that they employed.

With their wide field of view, I can imagine that they would also be very useful for viewing many sports. Certainly cricket and baseball, possibly even horse-racing, and they would allow golfers to not only watch the swing of Tiger Woods or Rory McIlroy but also to follow the balls through the air to their destination.

Are there any downsides? Only the rain-guard (ocular guard) which, as has been mentioned elsewhere on Birdforum, fits so tightly around the eyecups that it is impossible to get it easily and quickly on and off. This means rain gets on the ocular lenses and not only spoils the view through the binoculars, but also tempts you to wipe off the raindrops, risking scratching the lenses if there are dust or sand particles from previous days' outings, hidden by the raindrops. On the other hand there are plenty of aftermarket guards to solve this issue but if you go down this route take care the replacement guard is big enough to slide on and off the eyecups easily, as they have a bigger outer diameter than most at 43.5mm. For comparison, Zeiss's Conquest HD 8x32 eyecups are 39.95mm, Leica's Ultravid HD's are 38mm and Meopta's B1 10x32's are 35mm.

My conclusion is that these binoculars are extremely versatile, having proved themselves to be fine companions in a wide variety of circumstances ranging from birding and twilight mammal observation, through fungi spotting and geology, to tourist duties such as admiring buildings, paintings and panoramas in cities and on coasts. I am confident they would be super at sporting events, and although this has been the wrong time of year to test them out on butterflies and dragonflies, I am certain they would excel at this too. Anyone looking for a compact and versatile pair of binoculars for a modest outlay should give these a try.