GPO Passion ED 8x32
A Review
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It is three years since I reviewed any GPO instruments and in 2017 I dealt with a 42mm and a 50mm. At last I have got around to a 32mm, and it's the Passion ED 8x32. The Passion ED line and the closely-related Spectra line are GPO's lower-priced models, but just like the Passion HD models I have reviewed, this unit exudes quality, with a leather-like texture on some surfaces and a lovely satin-smooth finish on others. The fit and finish is simply superb and combined with the aluminium eyecups that move without any free-play, all contribute to a feeling of very high quality in the hand.

One small distribution complication to note is that for a time in Europe, GPO instruments were exclusively sold through RUAG outlets under the GECO brand, and indeed can still be found there. However, GPO is now building their own dealership network in Europe in which the same instruments can be found branded GPO, and it is one of these latter versions that I have in front of me.

In the UK this GPO model retails at around £335, in Europe at around €339 and in the USA at approximately $390. In the UK this means ED 8x32 faces a few obvious competitors:

GPO ED 8x32	£335
Zeiss Terra ED 8x32	£349
Opticron Traveller BGA ED 8x32	£308
Hawke Frontier EDX 8x32	£349

On price, this is a close-packed bunch but what about on specifications?

Length and weight

GPO	118mm/4.6in, 520g/18.3oz
Zeiss	125mm/4.9in, 510g/18.0oz
Opticron	119mm/4.7in, 451g/15.9oz
Hawke	120mm/4.7in, 540g/19.0oz

This tells us that the Opticron is significantly lighter than the rest which average 523g making the Opticron 14% lighter, and although there is not much to choose between these when comparing lengths, the Opticron is almost the shortest. However the shortest is the GPO and it is competitive with the Zeiss and Hawke on weight but is well-beaten by the Opticron.

Field of View and Eye Relief

GPO	139m/420ft, 16.0mm
Zeiss	135m/405ft, 16.5mm
Opticron	143m/429ft, 19.0mm
Hawke	135m/405ft, 16.0mm

Here we can see that on field of view the GPO performs significantly better than the Zeiss or Hawke but is beaten by the Opticron that delivers just short of 6% extra *area* of view. There is a dramatic difference between the16/16.5mm Eye Relief of the GPO/Zeiss/Hawke and the Opticron which has 19.0mm ER. However I urge a little caution here as from experience I can say that the Terra's eyecups work well with the ER and I have used Leicas with ERs of 16mm and also had no problems with them. Just bear in mind that the ER is only half of the story and the other half is the eyecups and there is no substitute for trying them out to see if they work for you.

Close Focus

GPO	2.0m/6.6ft	Actual 1.7m
Zeiss	1.6m/4.9ft	
Opticron	1.8m/5.9ft	Actual 1.6m

Hawke 2.5m/8.2ft
The GPO is competitive here if beaten on specification by the Zeiss and Opticron, although it is worth trying out different units if close focus is important as there can be differences between units, and in fact the GPO I am reviewing actually focused down to 1.7 metres / 5.6ft. However it is the Hawke that is really lacking. A close focus of 2.5m/8.2ft is good enough for birding but a bit disappointing if the instrument is intended for general nature observation.

Summary of Specifications and Price
The GPO is 'there or thereabouts' for the specification points I have discussed, so is definitely competitive, but the clear winner on paper is the Opticron Traveller with the lowest price here and the lowest weight, the best field of view and very competitive on length and close focus. However the real test is out in the field. As usual, I want to find out if the unit can deliver useful and enjoyable nature observing, in keeping with its price, and as with my most recent review, due to Coronavirus lockdown, I am not able to roam around our neighbourhood or indeed visit the islands off the west of Scotland. However even in the area around our house this is a very busy time of year for birds with families of Blue Tits, Great Tits and Long-tailed Tits visiting most days and a range of other passerines and a few raptors.

In the Hand
As already mentioned, the fit and feel of these instruments is well above that indicated by their price. One factor that contributes to this is the lack of any visible seams in the armour, and another is the siting of the brand name down the outside of the left-hand optical tube, instead of on the front of the bridge, where only the GPO 'eagles-wing' logo is to be found. It gives the front view of the instrument a neat and uncluttered, 'classy' appearance.

The focus wheel moves with a nicely damped feel, smooth, not too easy, not too stiff. Don't forget GPO focusers turn in an anti-clockwise direction from near to far, but don't get too anxious about this, a few minutes out in the field and half a dozen subjects found and focused, and your hands and brain adapt more quickly than you expect.

The dioptre adjuster is on the right-hand optical tube and adjusted stiffly to prevent unwanted movement. The adjuster has grooves all around its circumference and all but one of them is painted black. The groove that acts as the index is painted pale grey and in most lights this made it very obvious, but on a few occasions I struggled to see which groove was the index. This was when a moderately strong light coming from one side made the opposite sides of all the grooves shine with the reflection, and this made the gloss black in the grooves look the same as the grey in the index. Tilting the binos so that the light wasn't reflected in the way I described instantly made the grey index obvious.

The eyecups worked well with my spectacles and the ER of 16mm. When viewing without spectacles I needed to rest the upper curve of the eyecups against the underside of my brows to avoid blackouts. I hasten to add that that this wasn't some precarious balancing-act that was hard to remember or maintain, it just meant I needed to avoid jamming the eyecups into my sockets. This was no difficulty at all, and soon became instinctive, although I mostly viewed wearing spectacles.

At the other end of the instruments I noticed that the objective lenses are inset by 9mm/0.35in and may benefit from a 'lens-hood' effect, reducing any glare.

The carrying case is a semi-hard design, similar in concept to the one that comes with Zeiss SFs. With neck-strap, ocular guard and objective guard fitted, the whole lot allowed the case to be zipped up without use of murderous force, whether the strap went behind the binos or in front. Congratulations to GPO for supplying a shoulder strap for the case too. However, minus points for

the ocular guard which only allows attachment to the right-hand strap. I have said it before, but would bino brands please supply ocular guards with loops at both sides, so that customers have the choice of left-hand side, or right-hand side, or both-sides, attachment? The ocular guard is only barely acceptable for ease of fitting and removing. It is a little too tight to remove and refit, and therefore too slow, meaning more rain on the ocular lenses, and a delay in getting the binos up to your eyes to view. The deep inset of the objective lenses that I have already mentioned means that the objective guards fit very securely, and there is a tether to attach the guard to the binos. The neck-strap itself is tailored just enough to sit partly around your shoulders and partly up against the back of your neck and feels very comfortable.

Field Observations

As usual the first check is for chromatic aberration and in the centre field there is none, with just a little CA visible from around 50% of the distance to the field edge. At the edge, CA is a little more apparent, but care with your IPD minimises this. Pincushion distortion is visible at the field edge too but doesn't cause any concern during nature observations. The sweet-spot is about 80% of the field of view and the outer rim of softer focus, while a fraction more visible than through Opticron's Traveller, is easily brought into focus with a nudge of the focus wheel.

We are lucky to have many trees in our back garden, as well as a pond, and our house is set quite high to overlook much of the garden, including our bird-feeding station. Within minutes of setting up the ED with neck-strap and ocular guard (I don't use objective guards) a 'shower' of birds arrived in our Rowan Tree, and through the ED I could see it was a mixed flock of adult and juvenile Blue Tits and Great Tits. An adult Blue Tit, together with a juvenile flew over to the Hawthorn hedge near the feeder, and the adult began flying backwards and forwards with food for the youngster. The EDs captured all the detail of the adults frayed and worn plumage (the juvenile was probably from the second brood so the adult was showing all the signs of plumage wear). These bird work so hard to bring up their families. The juvenile had the basic blue pattern of the adult but the whole plumage was suffused with a yellow tint, and the EDs really did justice to this strange-sounding but appealing combo of blue and yellow. A nice start to the ED's audition which was soon followed up by a great view of an adult preening after bathing in our pond. Each preening action separated and then smoothed out every vane on each breast feather and the EDs gave me a fine view of each detail.

A little further away, on what we call 'The Stropping Perch', where birds of all species stop briefly to strop their beaks to get rid of sticky substances, I spotted 4 more Blue Tits, all engaged in preening. But were they? Through the GPOs it became clear the 3 adults were heavily into plumage maintenance but the fourth, a yellow-suffused youngster was pecking and poking at a small twig with exaggerated movements back and forth. It was just playing. Kids!

The following day it was the turn of our local male Blackbird to take a bath, and then fly up to the top of the Hawthorn hedge to preen. For our State-side members I should explain that Blackbirds over here are different from those known as 'Blackbirds' in the States, and are not considered pests. This male perched out in the open and every few seconds briefly stopped preening to check for danger signs, a well worth-while precaution as we have Sparrowhawks in our neighbourhood. Through the EDs his coal-black plumage was so black it seemed to suck light in and entrap it, leaving his bright orange beak and eye-ring as beautiful contrasts. I was struck, too, by the fact that when he loosened his body plumage to the maximum, pale grey patches became visible, created by the tips of his body-feathers which disappeared completely, when he finished his preening and smoothed his plumage back into position. A common bird but so very beautiful, and thanks to the EDs, beautifully portrayed.

There followed two days of rain and sightings of a Kestrel and later, two Jackdaws, but these were nothing but silhouettes glimpsed briefly, then as the day cleared and visibility improved, there came

Swifts! This most aerial of species is such a delight to see and hear, and into my field of view came 3 Swifts, swooping at high speed but without fluttering their wings, and briefly, they were side-by-side looking for all the world like a line of B2 Stealth Bombers, all wing and no tail. One rose up and lost speed before turning against a dark cloud backdrop and I got the merest hint of the pale patch on its chin.

Then the sun came out and once more I had Blue Tits preening on top of our Hawthorn hedge, but this time one of them decided to go into full 'sunning' mode and leant forward, head turned sideways, then spread both wings and tail to get sunlight right down to the feather bases. It is supposed that the sunlight can make some parasites drop off but the effect for me was to expose the fanned wingtips and tail-feathers to examination and I could see the pattern of wear on the tips of the feathers.

I scanned the sky continually during the next few days, hoping that the local Buzzards or Sparrowhawks would put in an appearance, but unfortunately, they must have been under Coronavirus lock-down. Nevertheless, the watching paid off because into the big Oak came a Mistle Thrush. These are tough, robust birds, bigger than Blackbird and Song Thrush, and well-deserving of their name in Scotland: Storm Cock. This thrush likes nothing better than to perch on the top-most point of any tree to sing, and if it is in the teeth of a gale with lashing rain, it is no matter, he just sings his heart out whatever the weather. This one had more and bigger spots than is comfortable to imagine, merging into patches at the side of the breast, and as usual was holding his head up and slight angle, which could describe as jaunty or haughty depending on your point of view. A truly impressive bird that the GPOs did justice to and as it flew off I could see the grey-suffused mantle and whitish edges to the outer tail feathers.

Summing up
This GPO has performed up to its price level and is finished to a level beyond this. Of the other models listed above, the Opticron is tempting at a lower price, is lighter with a wider field of view, and has a closer close-focus, but although robust and workmanlike, it is not as well finished as the GPO. The Opticron also focuses clockwise to infinity like many other binos, whereas the GPO focuses anti-clockwise, in common with an increasing number of models but I didn't find this a problem at all.

So there you have it, a nicely performing bino that feels good in the hands and is easy on the eye. Both the GPO and Opticron's Traveller deserve auditioning before you make a decision at this price level.

Lee