

# Talking point

## What you can achieve when you combine your passions...

One of the most enjoyable aspects of watching birds is meeting new people who share your enthusiasm. Last month, I met Gerry Dobler, Head of Product Management at Zeiss, on my patch at Minsmere RSPB reserve, in Suffolk. His role at Zeiss is to specify exactly what is required from a new product, by crystallising the needs and wants of customers, and to work with the designers to translate these into the specification of every single element of the equipment. Like most of the people reading this editorial, Gerry is passionate about wildlife and watching birds; in his case, that passion has been the catalyst in his drive to create the best binoculars for birdwatching.

Gerry was proudly sporting a prototype of the new Zeiss SF binoculars, which are due to be unveiled in the UK at the 2014 Birdfair. The new binocular is distinctive, with a triple-link bridge between two sleek barrels finished in muted grey rubber armouring. Gerry was quietly confident that these may be the best binoculars ever made for watching wildlife – and given his expertise in the subject, that's no idle claim. Right from the off, Gerry enthused about birds with intricate plumage detail – Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* being two of his particular favourites – and how his knowledge of binocular design has enabled him to develop instruments that bring the detail of such cryptic plumage patterns to life. He confessed that his visit to Minsmere would be crowned by seeing a Bittern. The pressure was on...

The hyperactive Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* buzzing around their colony close to the reserve's Visitor Centre provided an ideal opportunity to showcase the exceptionally wide field of view of the new binoculars (a gargantuan 148 m at 1,000 m in the 8 × 42),

in which the image remains pin sharp right to the edge. This is something that birders above all other users demand. Keeping a fast-moving bird in focus can be critical – if it's flying away, an extra second or two of detail can make the difference between one that got away and one that is inked into the diary at the end of the day!

Our next stop was Bittern hide; frustratingly, the hide did not live up to its moniker and we had to be content with fabulous views of young Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* over the reedbeds. I explained how the RSPB has managed the reedbed to restore wetter habitat and improve the habitat quality for breeding Bitterns. Gerry remarked on the contrast between the UK and Germany in this interventionist approach to land management, so well-established in the UK, yet not attempted on any significant scale in his native Germany. He was also surprised to hear about the decline of the Water Vole *Arvicola amphibius* in the UK, a species still so abundant in Germany that it is considered a pest and a threat to successful water-level management.

Gerry previously worked for Swarovski,



Adam Rowlands

252. Gerry Dobler at Minsmere, July 2014.

where he was the Product Manager in charge of the immensely successful EL binocular range. I saw him smiling as we wandered around the reserve, passing many visitors sporting the familiar ELs. I asked him if he felt proud of his achievements in binocular design. He pondered before replying that it was more satisfaction than pride, the ELs being a significant stage in his continued quest to design the very best instruments for watching wildlife. Gerry has been crafting the SF range for Zeiss with the same optics designer he worked with at Swarovski and described the myriad challenges in developing a product that represents significant progress on existing models. Getting the right team in place has been critical for transforming his ergonomic and optical ideas into a successful pair of binoculars. We talked also about how large companies, such as the leading optics producers, have the potential to do more for conservation. Gerry is bullish about the prospects, full of enthusiasm for the initiatives during his time at Swarovski, and confident of making a real impact on conservation in his current role at Zeiss.

The SF range brings a raft of improvements compared with its predecessors. Greater light transmission is achieved by the innovative design of a new, three-lens objective system. The Zeiss lens coatings achieve an extremely high level of consistency for light transmission for this model, something that I was surprised to learn is unusual with binoculars. Not only can light transmission levels vary (sometimes significantly) between individual pairs for other models, they can even vary between the right and left barrel in the same pair – and this variability has been largely eliminated with the new Zeiss. The shift from five objective lenses to three, coupled with the use of special, thin SCHOTT glass, brings benefits in terms of weight distribution too. In simple terms, the reduced weight of the objective lenses redistributes the balance forward, closer to the eyepieces. The binoculars are already the lightest in their class (780 g for both 8 × 42 and 10 × 42), but because they ‘sit’ better than their rivals, they feel even lighter than they really are. That same redesign also makes it possible to achieve such an enormous field of view.

The devil is most definitely in the detail. The carrying case with its magnetic flip strap, enabling the binoculars to be ready in gun-slinger fashion at a moment’s notice, is an incredibly neat design, although I suspect that most rarity hunters will be more impressed with the focusing system (SF = ‘Smart Focus’), which delivers a sharp image at top speed. Fast focusing can make a critical difference when it comes to processing detail, when you’re trying to nail the tertial pattern of a skulking warbler at dusk in late September. From infinity to the damselfly near the toe end of your boot is a mere 1.8 turns, another marked improvement on these binoculars’ key rivals. The bridge between the barrels lies nearer the eyepiece than in similar models, which both helps the overall balance and makes the binoculars more comfortable to hold. It certainly felt good when scanning the woodland canopy at Minsmere, but Gerry assured me that the differences will be most apparent in really dense habitats, such as a tropical forest or surveying in conifer plantations. It was just one more occasion where it was brought home to me that these binoculars really have been designed by someone who knows what birders want.

We finished our circuit of Minsmere at the Island Mere hide. A last chance to enjoy a glorious summer’s day through the fantastically bright SFs. The sight of an Otter *Lutra lutra* swimming serenely across the mirror-calm surface was clearly a major treat for Gerry, and he forgot about the binoculars’ design as he drank in the detail. And the icing on the cake came when a Bittern dropped into the reeds close to the hide just as we were getting ready to leave. I couldn’t have scripted it better! Even with the new SF, the brief view wasn’t sufficient to appreciate intricate feather detail, but the Bittern was very definitely inked into the notebook. It was the perfect finale to an enjoyable day.

### *Adam Rowlands*

This editorial marks the launch of one of the most significant Zeiss binoculars for watching wildlife in the company’s history, and we include the account here as a way of saying thank you to Zeiss, and to RSPB, for their continued support of BBRC.