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SCANNING THE FIELD: Clipboards in hand, Wisconsin birders Joan Sommer (left), Dennis Kuecherer, and Chris Jost put miniscopes to the test.

Mighty minis

We asked a team of experienced birdwatchers to test nine pocket-size spotting scopes and found a clear winner and one big surprise

Small is not a word that comes to mind when we think about spotting scopes. Recently, however, birders have begun using scopes produced for hunters that are anything but long, large, bulky, and expensive — the more common adjectives associated with scopes.

Mini spotting scopes weigh less than three pounds, measure 8-10 inches long, and in most cases can fit in a pocket. But do they provide the crisp, bright views birders expect? We decided to find out. Nine manufacturers loaned us their scopes, and we tested them with members of the Riveredge Bird Club in southeastern Wisconsin on a rainy Saturday morning last September.

Our 10 testers are all experienced birders who own their own traditional

spotting scopes, and none had used a miniscope previously. We asked them to rate each model's image quality, ease of use, and other factors. The results are summarized on the next two pages.

The best of the bunch, according to our testers, was the Nikon Fieldscope ED50. Its extra-low dispersion (ED) glass produces a bright, wide field of view, and its \$700 price tag didn't deter a few birders who said they'd like to buy one.

We also uncovered a great bargain: Celestron's Mini Zoom, which outperformed almost every other scope. It lists for only \$131 and is available online for \$80 to \$90. Noel Cutright, founder of the Riveredge Bird Club, called it the "best buy" for its overall quality and low price.

— Matt Mendenhall, Associate Editor

How they rated

Our reviewers liked the Nikon Fieldscope the most and the Vortex Impact the least and named the Celestron Mini Zoom a best buy. Models were scored on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

Nikon Fieldscope ED50	4.7
Brunton Eterna angled	4.1
Celestron Mini Zoom	3.8
Minox MD 50 W	3.8
Bushnell Spacemaster Collapsible	3.5
Kowa TS-501	3.2
Barska Tactical	2.8
Burris XTS-2575	2.5
Vortex Impact	2.4

MODEL	STREET PRICE	MSRP	EYE RELIEF (MM)	WEIGHT (OZ)	CLOSE FOCUS (FT)	FIELD OF VIEW (FT)	BRIGHTNESS LO HI	SHARPNESS LO HI	CONT RAST LO HI	COLOR LO HI	FINISH	EASE OF USE	EYEGLASS COMFORT	IN CAR?	ON PLANE?	WATCH FEEDER?	SECOND SCOPE?	OVERALL	
Under \$100 - BEST BUY!																			
 Celestron Mini Zoom 50mm, 12-36x, waterproof. Comes with case, tripod.	\$79	\$109	17mm @36x	23	23 @36x	160 @12x	3.9 3.4	3.9 3.5	3.9 3.5	3.9 3.8	4.3	4.2	3.6	9	9	8	8	3.8	
Under \$500																			
 Bushnell Spacemaster Collapsible 50mm, 15-45x, 25x. Comes with case, grip cover, second eyepiece, tripod.	\$135	\$218	14mm, 16mm	23	11	113 @15x, 110 @25x	3.9 3.2	4.0 3.2	3.8 3.3	4.0 3.2	3.7	3.4	3.3	6	7	8	5	3.5	
 Barska Tactical 50mm, 11-44x, waterproof. Comes with soft case, tripod.	\$150	\$300	15mm @11x	21	13	181 @11x	3.3 2.4	2.5 2.1	2.9 2.4	3.2 2.6	3.6	2.7	3.3	3	3	3	2	2.8	
 Vortex Impact 70mm mirror, 25-75x, waterproof. Comes with case, tripod.	\$200	\$249	18mm @25x	37	33	89 @25x	2.6 2.0	2.5 2.1	2.5 2.1	2.7 2.4	3.0	1.8	3.1	0	1	1	0	2.4	
 Burriss XTS-2575 70mm mirror, 25-75x, waterproof. Comes with case, tripod.	\$205	\$349	23mm @25x	33	15	58 @25x	2.5 2.3	2.5 2.1	2.3 2.1	2.6 2.4	3.0	2.9	2.9	1	1	3	0	2.5	
 Kowa TS-501 50mm, 20-40x, 20x, water-resistant.	\$235	\$273	13mm @20x	15	19.7	121 @20x	3.9 2.7	3.5 2.6	3.3 2.6	3.6 2.7	3.4	3.6	3.3	6	5	5	2	3.2	
 Minox MD 50 W 50mm, 16-30x, waterproof. Comes with cover.	\$350	\$450	15mm @16x	22	16.4	142 @16x	4.2 3.6	3.8 3.5	3.6 3.4	4.2 3.7	4.1	3.6	4.0	8	9	10	7	3.8	
Top of the Line																			
 Brunton Eterna angled 50mm, 18-38x, waterproof. Comes with cover.	\$480	\$810	16mm @18x	24	20	68 @18x	4.5 4.1	4.0 3.6	4.0 3.7	4.5 4.0	3.8	4.5	4.3	9	8	9	7	4.1	
 Nikon Field-scope ED50 50mm, 13-30x, waterproof. Comes with cover.	\$700	\$1,000	13mm @13x	20	10	171 @13x	4.9 4.8	4.8 4.7	4.8 4.6	4.7 4.6	4.7	4.5	4.7	10	10	10	10	4.7	

What we tested

Image quality


First, we had our reviewers judge brightness, sharpness, contrast, and color for each model at its lowest power of magnification. Then we asked them to judge the scope again at its highest useful power. Evaluators were instructed to rate each criterion on a scale ranging from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Numbers in **green columns** show the reviewers' average response.

General quality

Next we instructed reviewers to assess finish and appearance, ease of focus and handling, and eyeglass comfort, using the same scale (1-5). Numbers in **green columns** show the reviewers' average response. Numbers in the **yellow column** are averages of ratings in green columns.

Potential uses

We also asked our testers to sum up their appraisal of each model. We did so with four questions: Would you consider using this scope window-mounted in a car? Would you consider taking this scope when traveling by plane? Would you consider using this scope for observing birds at backyard feeders? And would you consider buying this scope as a second spotting scope? Numbers in **orange columns** show how many of our 10 reviewers answered yes to each question.

Note: Street prices were obtained from Amazon.com, Binoculars.com, Eagle Optics, and Optics Planet. You may find the same models available for sale from other vendors at different prices. 

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Riveredge Nature Center
<http://riveredgenaturecenter.org>