

# cold play



*Nine years ago, Swarovski released its trend-setting EL binoculars. Now it has taken up the challenge to improve on its winning formula. The new EL range is slimmer and more compact, with a wider field of view and close focus to only 1.5 metres. Peter Ryan went to Iceland to test whether they live up to the title of ultimate birding binoculars.*

**I**t was the kind of call that livens up a dull day. I was working at home when the phone rang: 'Swarovski is launching a new pair of binoculars in Ireland. Do you want to go?' It seemed like an odd venue, but the chance to hobnob with some of Europe's leading birders and to play with some state-of-the-art binoculars was too good to miss. I accepted with alacrity. Shortly afterwards, I received the first written correspondence about the trip, and the venue had morphed to Iceland. It's amazing what a difference one letter can make.

Two months later, I was peering eagerly out of the window of an IcelandAir 757 as we banked over the south-western tip of the land of fire and ice.

Out to sea, the isolated stack of Eldey stood out white against the grey ocean, thanks to the efforts of some 70 000 Northern Gannets to coat it in guano. My appreciation of the spectacle was dampened by the knowledge that this was one of the last breeding sites of the Great Auk. But the signs were more promising as we glided low over the coast to land at Keflavik Airport, with flocks of gulls and waterfowl flushing before the approaching plane.

After landing and presenting my outrageously expensive visa to a suspicious-looking immigration official, I joined the veritable European Union of invited dignitaries. Birding in the car park, while waiting for the last few members of the party to arrive, yielded

Common Snipe, Whimbrel and the only Snow Bunting of the trip.

From the airport it was only a short drive to the hotel in Keflavik, which was the venue for the media briefing. A quick walk along the coast provided a foretaste of what was to come. Northern Fulmars, Common Eiders and Arctic Terns were abundant, with smaller numbers of Great Northern Divers, Black Guillemots, Black-legged Kittiwakes and sundry gulls. But passerines were scarce, with only the occasional Common Starling and White Wagtail to be seen.

Back at the hotel, we finally got to see what the hype was about. Swarovski has upgraded the EL 42mm range, adding new 8.5x and 10x models. The changes are radical in terms of lens design, with

six lenses now making up the objective cluster, including a novel field-flattener lens. But there have been only subtle changes to the external appearance, so the marketing gurus decided to retain the EL label, given its brand value. From September 2008, you will need to specify your binoculars as being either 'old' or 'new' ELs. After the presentation, we were lent pairs of the new binoculars to try out over the following two days. We immediately decamped to the hotel forecourt, where the bemused residents of Keflavik must have thought it was a perverts' convention, as we peered at anything that moved.

**T**he revamped ELs live up to Swarovski's enviable reputation. The lenses are made with HD glass that, coupled with Swarovski's market-leading coating systems, results in arguably the brightest and sharpest image on the market. I found them to be on a par with Canon's impressive image-stabilised 10x42, apart from a slight squashing of image size towards the edge of the field of view (admittedly a problem no one else perceived). The exit pupil remains the same, but much wider eye-pieces give longer eye-relief



(20mm in both 8.5x and 10x models) and, although the actual field of view has only increased by about two per cent, it appears appreciably wider. Another technical improvement is a greater range of adjustment for differences between a user's eyes (individual eyepiece compensation of six to eight diopters).

For many birders, a key advantage will be the even closer focusing, reduced from 2.5 to 1.5 metres. This is thanks to a new focusing system that operates smoothly across the full range. It does require a fair bit of cranking to get right down to minimum-focus distance – slightly more than two full turns of the wheel from infinity to the minimum – but, at more conventional distances, the focus is crisp and easy to use. The main problem with focusing at less than two metres is that a degree of effort is required to superimpose the images, but this is an inevitable problem with very close-focusing binoculars.

In terms of appearance, the package hasn't changed too much from the well-loved original EL design. Despite the increase in the number of lens elements, the weight has been decreased slightly for the 8.5x model, and only increased very marginally for the 10x model. This is as a result of a slimmer, slightly more compact shape. The focus wheel has been made even easier to use, and the thumb-grips are now better angled. Other improvements include better objective covers, comprising both ▷

**Above** Common Redshanks live up to their name in Iceland, occurring in a wide range of habitats, including along busy road verges.

**Left** Scanning for Pink-footed Geese on Pingvallavatn lake. The rock wall is one of a series of faults associated with the rifting between the European and North American plates that is literally tearing Iceland in half.

**Opposite** An obliging Red-throated Diver remained on its nest right next to the road, despite the close attention of 25 birders.



*At a glance, the new EL range can be recognised by the black lines linking the hinges.*



*Common Eiders flourish in Iceland, with at least 300 000 pairs carefully guarded for their precious harvest of eiderdown.*

*Northern Fulmars are probably the most common birds in Iceland, with more than a million pairs estimated to breed on cliffs along the coast and up to 30 kilometres inland. Their numbers have increased dramatically in recent years.*



hard and soft compounds, and lockable eye-cups in two intermediate positions (a third position, close to fully screwed in, would be a nice addition). The new ELs come with a soft case that most people immediately discarded; more useful was a handy camera adaptor that simply clips onto an eye-piece and has a universal grip to mount any small point-and-shoot digital camera.

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*The handy clip-on camera holder makes 'digi-binning' easier than ever.*

an interesting experience. In two and a half days, we managed to see barely 50 species, yet this was most of the regular summer avifauna. Some birds were present in abundance. It took a while to get used to seeing Redshanks, Golden Plovers and Whimbrels along the side of the freeway, and Common Snipes perched on lamp-posts, whereas Northern Fulmars were ubiquitous from the coast to inland cliffs. But, apart from Redwings and Common Starlings, passerines were uncommon, with species such as Northern Wheatears, Winter Wrens and Redpolls surprisingly scarce.

The new ELs will be available in Europe from September 2008. They will replace the existing 42mm ELs, and have a suggested retail price of around €2 400. The 32mm objective ELs will remain unchanged for the time being.

To cut to the chase, what can I say about the new 8.5x EL? Is it a fine pair of binoculars? Undoubtedly. Is it an improvement on what has gone before? Yes, but a small step rather than a quantum leap, given that Swarovski is competing with the old EL, which remains a very good pair of binoculars with excellent optics. Was I reluctant to leave the demo model behind at the end of the trip? Absolutely. The only downside is the price. □