

## Kowa XD 8.5x44 Prominar (Genesis)

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Description: Kowa XD 8.5x44 Prominar (Genesis)

The Japanese based manufacturer Kowa is well known for its top-quality telescopes, but as for yet not much for its line of binoculars. Although inventions worked into the scopes were consistently applied to the binoculars, the impression is that with respect to marketing Kowa quietly allowed them to take second seat to the models produced by the likes of Zeiss, Leica, Swarovski and Nikon. With the introduction of the two XD Prominar (or Genesis) binoculars, a 10x44 and an 8.5x44, it looks like this policy has been changed. Promoted with 'a new beginning' and 'second generation', Kowa seems intended to take up the challenge and meet the top 4's competition head-on. At a price of roughly two thirds of their Zeiss, Leica and Swarovski counterparts, Kowa offers Fluorite glass in both, air-spaced, objective lenses to control chromatic aberration. In comparison to the existing BD-line the housing has been modified as well, both ergonomically and aesthetically. With respect to the latter, I think Kowa has succeeded completely: the XD's are very attractive to the eye. And to the hands as well: there is some kind of thumb-rest on the binoculars but it's so shallow no-one will experience discomfort. Also, the balance is excellent, the (green) cladding reminds one strongly of the material used by Swarovski (could be the same) and the dioptre setting – in locked, small steps – won't travel on its own. Last but not least there's the large focussing wheel, made of solid metal, with exactly the right mass, speed and smoothness. This is the nicest focussing wheel I've laid my fingers on, ever.

Accessories. The bino's come with tethered objective covers, rain cap, neoprene strap (52 mm at the widest point) and a Cordura case with no strap of its own (you can lead the binoculars' strap out). But of course it's the view that counts. Of the two Kowa XD's, which btw are identical in appearance and dimensions, I tested the 8.5x44, in comparison to a Swift Audubon 8.5x44 804ED (1994) because of its ED-glass and matching configuration, and a Leica Ultravid 8x42 BL. Next to this side-by-side comparison I used the Kowa in the field for two weeks without using anything else. Well, image-wise it was obvious from the get-go that this is a real modern binocular. The image is exquisitely transparent across the whole field of view: it's bright, displaying very good contrast and colour. Against a Kowa 8x32 BD I also had on hand it was clear the XD is in another league. This is real optical quality, as good as the best out there.

The Swift appeared as slightly more subdued against the Kowa's brightness but I think this is a point where taste and one's idea of absolute neutrality comes in: to my taste modern roof binoculars are often delivering the goods a bit too bright – as if the gods suddenly have switched on a spotlight. The Kowa's Fluorite treatment definitely paid off against the Leica which suffers from colour fringing, and less so against the Swift (no preference here). Contrast is also better, more neutral, than the Leica's slightly exaggerated transmission of high lights and strongly contrasting detail (I happen to like this 'beautified' contrast in the Leica because it makes it a very 'fast' tool for identification – which is 90% of what birding is all about - but I'm the first one to admit that neutrality is another matter).

With respect to resolution, the ability to transmit fine detail, I had a hard time finding a difference between the three. Only when going to extremes - using test chart-like material, barcodes and spider's webs - could I detect anything significant. That is, with the Leica resolving on par with the Kowa, the Swift Audubon consistently performed just a little better. But by such a small margin, I wouldn't – and didn't - worry for a second when using the Kowa in a more realistic situation, i.e. out in the field, birding.

These are excellent results. However, taking Kowa's price point into account and, as such, their clear intention to present the XD's as 'affordable top quality', one would expect some compromises. So where did Kowa compromise? In two things: weight and viewing angle. These binoculars are, in comparison to the competition, rather heavy: 950 gr. (33.5 oz.). Now, one gets a real solid, dream-like focus wheel in return, and a very useful amount of mass to minimize shake, but it's against the trend (note: I completely forgot about the weight within a few days use, but maybe that's just me). The 7 deg. angle of view, which equates to a field of view of 122/1000m (366ft/1000y), is just adequate for a 8.5x binocular. It's on the brink: very well usable, but nothing more. Now the interesting thing is that this is both for the better and the worse. The positive effect of a field stop like

this is that edge distortions can be kept out of the view (modern people associate a fuzzy edge with low quality) and aperture distortions (flare, ghosting, stray light) can be better controlled. Considering the remarkably clear, uncluttered view of the Kowa XD I think that's exactly what's happening.

The downside of a limited FoV is, of course, loss of information and diminished ease of view. For instance, I couldn't escape from some slight discomfort in the sense that the view seemed smaller, less generous to me than the Leica's – which shouldn't since their apparent angle of view is about equal (59.5 deg.). This feeling of 'smallness' quickly made way for great satisfaction when using the Kowa on its own, in the field. But only, I'd like to add, after I took some measures against another, related problem: the eyecups.

The Kowa XD comes with large diameter eyecups which I would call oversized. That is, they are not oversized if you use them the way Kowa quite clearly intended: against the eyebrows. In this position the (long) eye relief is excellent, and aided by the 4-step adjustment in the cups everyone should be able to find a comfortable position. However, if you decide to use the binoculars the way Kowa NOT intended you may easily run into trouble. That is, you will crush your nose. Or, if you don't want to do that because you like your nose, you may be unable to find the correct interpupillary distance.

Since I don't like being told by any manufacturer, or designer or, even worse, the majority of people, how to hold my binoculars to my face, the decision was quickly made: I jerked off the rubber eyecups (no problem, they're only glued by convention) and put two nice pieces of bicycle inner tube in their place. Very neat, very good looking, and very satisfying: right into my eye sockets. Bingo!

So you see, these are great looking and performing binoculars with a rarely found quality-cost ratio. But also, they're full of character. Don't expect them to slavishly obey your orders. Educate them if you feel the urge. And the great news is, you can!

Renze de Vries