

EXPERT REVIEWS

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Mid-range masterpiece

With its attractive price point and high-quality optics, the updated Razor is a sure contender. **Mike Alibone** brings Vortex's advanced front-runner into sharp focus.

REVIEW

Vortex Razor HD 85 mm telescope

AS far as quality mid-range optics are concerned, American-based Vortex has always been worth keeping a close eye on. I've been consistently impressed with both its binoculars and telescopes (see, for example, *Birdwatch* 273: 70-71 and 262: 70-71 for reviews of the Razor 8x42 HD and Razor 50 HD respectively); its products are clearly aimed at capturing potential purchasers interested in top-tier equipment at a lower price point.

The latest version of the Razor 85 mm telescope was launched in October 2016, alongside the smaller 65-mm model. Its evolutionary path followed the latest products in the Vortex range, so once the chassis design had been finalised it was natural that the scope would inherit the aesthetics first seen in the Razor HD binocular range.

The resultant appearance is clean, sleek and rather compact for an 85-mm scope. Exuding

quality and finished in a subtle grey-green, the Razor 85 sports a rubber-armoured magnesium alloy body. A 360-degree rotating tripod foot click-stops in eight equidistant positions, although it can be secured at any point around the body's circumference. The foot is designed to lock directly into a standard Manfrotto tripod head, obviating the need for a quick-release plate.

A pull-out lens hood extends and retracts effortlessly. At the

opposite end of the scope, an integral rotating lock prevents the zoom eyepiece from becoming accidentally disengaged.

The move from the old model's dual-focus wheels to a dual-gear single barrel, helical focus ring is designed to improve the scope's overall durability and to simplify the focusing operation. Approximately three fingers wide, rubber covered and offering plenty of grip, I found this wheel to be a wonderfully smooth turner and focusing is achieved easily throughout the full range of the 27-60x magnification.

58 June's photo challenge

Those fast-flying martins are this month's subject – getting good shots really will be a challenge.

59 Wonderful waders

A photographic guide to identifying this tricky group of birds in Europe.

59 Introducing shorebirds

This fascinating new book provides an initial look at waders and their behaviour.

60 On the up

This popular account of bird evolution contains a wealth of information.

60 Whodunnit?

A birding murder mystery is a bit light on the mystery but provides an interesting read all the same.

61 What's new in the Bookshop?

Japan is home to a spectacular variety of birds and our latest Book of the Month, *Birds of Japan*, covers them all.

THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



DOMINIC MITCHELL is *Birdwatch*'s founder and Managing Editor. He has been birding in Britain and abroad for 45 years.



ANDY STODDART is Vice Chair of the Rarities Committee and the author of several books and ID papers.



MIKE ALIBONE is *Birdwatch*'s Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than 15 years.



ROB HUME began watching birds as a child. He worked for the RSPB for many years and has written several books.



STEVE YOUNG is Photographic Consultant for *Birdwatch* and an award-winning wildlife photographer.



TIM BIRKHEAD is Professor of Evolution and Behaviour at the University of Sheffield, as well as a well-known author.

Locking in the wide-angle zoom eyepiece is simple enough and it delivers a greater field of view than the previous version, despite starting at 27x rather than 20x magnification. Again, plenty of grip is offered by the zoom control, but for me, there was a little too much turning resistance during operation. However, coupled with the upgraded optical specifications within the body, the resulting image is rather nice.

Looking at the advances over previous Razor HD scopes, Vortex has upgraded to a Schmidt-Pecan prism in the optical system, alongside enhanced proprietary 'XRPlus' premium lens coatings applied by 'plasma tech' on all air-to-glass surfaces. The triplet apochromatic objective lens system remains the same, but uses higher-grade HD glass. These together are said to give improved colour rendition and image brightness over the previous model.

The proof of the pudding is in the field, where it all comes together to deliver a highly acceptable image. Edge-to-edge sharpness is a positive feature, even at the highest magnification, although with the four-position click-stop eyecup completely extended I was unable to see the full field of view. Both colour and contrast accurately hit the spot, while the scope has a 'warm' rendition to the image as opposed to the ice-cold feel of some optics. It's a matter of personal preference, of course, but some of the latter may give the impression of a brighter image.

The Razor's image is nicely bright, and in conditions of low light intensity it was more than acceptable. Viewing against bright backgrounds also presented few

problems. Encountering a mixed loafing gull flock set against the sun in a local river valley provided ample opportunity to appreciate the subtle differences in plumage tones between individuals of different ages and to test for chromatic aberration. This is around about the level I would expect in a scope of this calibre, being present in the centre of the field, when dark objects are viewed against bright, harshly lit backgrounds. Nevertheless, it gave me no cause for concern during general viewing.

To sum up, this is another attractive Vortex product and well worth considering if you are in the market for a mid-range scope. Competition is fierce and some internet retailers are currently offering substantial discounts on the suggested retail price. Vortex is also offering a 'VIP Unlimited Lifetime Warranty' which includes covering accidental damage that renders the scope unusable, while for the remainder of 2018, a Phoneskope eyepiece adapter (SRP £25) is included free of charge as part of the package. ■

Further info

- SRP: £1,529
- Size: 394x170 mm
- Weight: 1,860 g
- Magnification: 27-60x
- Field of view: 38.5-23 m at 1,000 m
- Light transmission: not available
- Close focus: 5 m
- Gas-filled: yes
- Waterproof: yes
- Warranty: Vortex VIP Unlimited Lifetime

Verdict

- ✓ Edge-to-edge sharpness
- ✓ Accurate colour and contrast
- ✗ Unable to see full field of view with eyecup fully extended

PRODUCT NEWS

■ Swarovski's digiscoping adapter now available for iPhone 8



THE PA-i8 securely attaches an iPhone 8 to Swarovski spotting scopes and binoculars, so they can be used as telephoto lenses, the optics manufacturer has announced.

The new adapter makes the world of digiscoping accessible to iPhone 8 users. The PA-i8 can be

quickly and easily connected to a variety of Swarovski optics by attaching the correct adapter ring to the relevant eyepiece cup. All the phone's features are available while using the adaptor, so the rugged aluminium frame can remain in place permanently, offering an extra level of smartphone protection.

The PA-i8 is compatible with the CL Companion, EL and SLC binocular ranges and ATX/STX/BTX, ATS/STS and ATM/STM telescopes. ■

MORE INFO Price: £161 with adapter ring or £143 on its own. See www.swarovskioptik.com for more information.

■ Chris Packham launches new outdoor clothing range



IN an attempt to address the problem of young people's increasing disconnection from nature, Chris Packham has announced the launch of his new outdoor clothing range for children.

"Kids have become more selective about what they will or won't wear," he said, so he has brought out some "cooler jackets, fleeces and trousers, aimed at the budding biologist". Each jacket comes with a set of field guides to birds, mammals, butterflies and bugs and a magnifying glass. The lining of each jacket also has a guide to the footprints left by Britain's commoner mammals and birds.

Men's and women's ranges are also available, all made from high-quality waterproof fabrics. The Chris Packham clothing range is sold exclusively by Cotswold Outdoor. ■

MORE INFO Price: from £45 for a child's fleece or £75 for an adult's fleece. See www.cotswoldoutdoor.com for more information.

