

Kite scope off to a flying start

Kite Optics has launched a scope to compete at the top end of the market. Find out what *Mike Albone* thought after putting the model through its paces.

Review: Kite KSP 80 HD telescope

Set to rival existing models from the recognised top-tier optics brands, the KSP 80 HD was launched last year by hitherto little-known Belgian company Kite Optics. Founded by birdwatchers and in business since 1984, all products from this organisation are made in Japan. For this, its flagship scope, Kite's Belgian and Japanese engineers worked jointly for three years to develop, as they put it, "a scope characterised by optical and ergonomical perfection, specially designed for the professional birdwatcher".

To see if they have succeeded, I took one out for a critical evaluation during May. At a length of 378 mm, including the large zoom eyepiece, it's relatively compact for an 80 mm scope, and in terms of weight it compares favourably with the top-drawer brands, which are generally similar or, in some instances, heavier. It is well constructed, fully protected by hard rubber armour and, in all respects, gives the appearance of being a well-finished, high-quality product. To some, the raised ribbing on the body may lend a dated look, but this is purely aesthetic and has no bearing on functionality or optical performance.

The rubber-covered objective lens hood, described as a 'solar hood', can only be pulled out and pushed back, not rotated. On the test model, I found it offered some

resistance to being fully extended and even more when attempting to push it back.

Like a slowly increasing number of other brands' models, the scope's tripod foot has been machine-shaped to dock directly with Manfrotto's range of tripod heads, so you will not need to attach it to a quick-release plate if you already own, or are thinking about buying, a Manfrotto tripod. The foot is mounted on a rotating ring which click-stops in eight positions. I found it well balanced, with the scope's centre of gravity running directly through the foot, so the scope did not tilt back or fall forwards when mounted on the tripod.

The integral focusing wheel forms part of the telescope body and adds sleekness to its outline. I found it very smooth turning, and its very wide (51 mm) and broad-ribbed design means it's easy to grip – or even to turn with a single finger. It is also easy to operate when wearing gloves.

Approximately two-thirds of a full rotation takes the image from close focus to infinity, which is great for fast focussing, when the occasion calls for switching rapidly between close and distant objects, or for following fast-moving birds in flight. This clearly has an advantage over the more usual multiple turns of a small, externally mounted focusing wheel, but I discovered that it also increases sensitivity, with just a tiny turn rendering the object out of focus. In fact, so sensitive was the focusing I found myself frequently having to 'fiddle' to make tiny adjustments to get distant birds sharply focused at the higher

end of the magnification range. This was not so noticeable with close-up birds where, at low magnification, the close focusing distance is down to approximately 3.7 m, which is virtually as good as it gets with any scope.

Furthering the trend towards larger diameter, more refined eyepieces, the scope comes with a detachable, wide-angle 25-50x zoom; the wide field of view (39.5 to 28 m) is evident during use and again compares very favourably with other top-tier brands, although this is made possible by restricting the top end of the magnification range to 50x. It is bayonet fitted and easily attached or removed, and while in place it is secured by rotating a simple locking ring.

The eyecups twist out to three positions above fully retracted, but it's worth noting I was unable to see the full field of view on the most distal (fully extended) position.

The manufacturers have hung their hat on image refinement, and the model uses high-quality ED glass with minimal colour dispersion to help achieve this. Following flying Common Swifts across a grey sky did not throw up an undue amount of chromatic aberration; in fact there is very little across the whole field and it is almost absent from the centre of the image. The image is similarly sharp across the majority of the field, with a little softening restricted to the outer periphery.

I was impressed with the colours: they are perfect, totally natural and the contrast is well balanced, while the overall colour rendition is neutral. There is an exceedingly narrow yellow margin to the edge of the field, which is barely noticeable during viewing.

This is all backed up by a nice, bright image, with little loss of brightness as you zoom from low to high magnification, but this is, of course, a function of the restricted magnification range – 25-50x as opposed to, say, 20-60x – so the difference won't be so apparent in comparison.

The market has seen new high-quality scopes come and go before, but in the current climate of upwardly spiralling top-end prices the Kite appears to offer serious value for money. So will it fly? Only you, as members of the highly discerning, birding optics-buying public, can decide ...

High-quality ED glass delivers bright image with little chromatic aberration

Body is fully protected by a covering of hard rubber armour

Tripod foot is made to fit Manfrotto's range of tripods

Wide field of view compares favourably with established brands

Tech spec

Price: £1,999 (with 25-50x zoom eyepiece)
Size: 378 mm (including eyepiece)
Weight: 1,910 g (including eyepiece)
Field of view: 39.5-28.0 m at 1,000 m
Close focus: 3.7 m
Gas-filled: yes
Waterproof: yes
Guarantee: 30 years