

Kowa TSN-99A Prominar spotting scope review

A new 99mm objective of pure fluorite crystal lens with a new extreme wide-angle eyepiece, is-it enough to compete with the other top scopes on the market?

In June 2022 I was fortunate enough to get my hands on the brand-new Kowa TSN 99a and the much-awaited eyepiece TE-80XW (thanks to Medas Instrument for this opportunity).

Kowa is a brand, which has long been associated with top-end optics, especially spotting scopes. This Japanese's company has been making spotting scope since the early 50s. I still remember as a child the first time I looked through the old Kowa TS-1 that my neighbour used to own. First look of a bird with this strange looking optic and I was hooked. The image came into focus with a tiny knob underneath the prism, it was sharp and detailed, much better than my small binoculars.

Back in 2006, Kowa unveiled its new TNS 883 with an 88mm pure fluorite crystal lens. This model quickly becomes one of the best field scopes on the market, extremely successful in North America.

Almost 15 years later, Kowa released the TSN 99, with a huge 99mm objective lens to continue the lineage of top-quality scopes. This new scope was launched in September 2021, alongside the new eyepiece TE-80XW with an impressive 80° viewing angle, the largest field of view in the sporting optic market. The new optical designed is aimed to reach nearly zero chromatic aberration.



The Kowa TSN 99 on the centre compared to the Leica APO Televid 82 on the left, and its tiny sibling the Kowa TSN 553 on the right.

Size and ergonomics:

It's a great looking scope; with the traditional "Kowa green" anodised finish and a black rubber on top of the prism unit. The rotating tripod foot operates nicely and smoothly and incorporate several detent clicks (they could have been a bit stronger as the scope doesn't stay in place in a 45° angle with the locking screw loose).

Also, it would have been great to have an integrated ARCA-type foot to avoid using quick release plates. Fortunately, there are two screw ports so you can attach a plate using two screws, this increases security and stability, which is very good.

The Kowa TSN 99 is a large scope, slightly bigger than a full size 80 or 85mm scope. At roughly 2180 grams with the zoom and 2350 grams with the fixed eyepiece, this scope despite its slightly larger objective lens is not heavier than the competition (Zeiss Harpia 95 2300g and Swarovski ATX 95 2200g). The slim body is made of magnesium alloy to reduce weight. It is not fully rubber armoured unlike Leica and Swarovski, which makes the scope a bit more vulnerable to scratches. If you use a field case, the rubber armour doesn't make much difference.

Dual focus:

This scope features a dual focus design like other top scopes from Kowa and Leica. While most of other manufacturers use helicoidal system. I personally find dual focus system to be the best for both viewing and shooting images through the scope, it introduces less shakes and vibrations when focusing as well as giving the best precision. The focus operates with two knobs, one coarse (fast focus) and one fine knob for precise focus. The fine focus is very smooth and precise; it's very easy to achieve perfect focus even with high magnifications. The fast focus feels a bit grainy, less smooth than the fine focus but remains very precise with no play or delay when turning the knob.



Eyepieces & accessories:

Kowa has a very large selection of accessories, from protective filters to phone/camera adapters. You will find everything you need to get the best out of your scope.

Another big plus for this new scope is the compatibility with all the eyepieces from the previous generation. Vice and versa the new TE-80XW can be used with the TSN 883/773. It is worth noting that magnifications change due to the different focal length between scopes. While it is a 40x on the big 99 scope, when using with the smaller scope the eyepiece works as a 35x with the same 80° viewing angle. This phenomenon applies to the zoom, 25-60x ramps up to 30-70x on the TSN 99.

Lens cap and eyepiece cover are provided, unfortunately they are poorly design with a cheap plasticky feel, not up to the scope high standard. The eyepiece does not come with a lanyard like we can see from the competition; this is quite annoying on the field as you can easily lose the eyepiece cover, same goes to the lens cap.

Image quality:

Starting with the zoom, the image is sharp, bright, and contrasty all the way up to 70x magnifications. Even at the highest value it is easy to focus and to get a sharp image. Edge to edge sharpness and chromatic aberrations control is nearly perfect. Thanks to the big 99mm objective lens, the image brightness remains excellent even at full power. When comparing side by side, the Kowa at 70x displayed about the same brightness, contrast, and sharpness than the Leica at 50x, with less chromatic aberrations than the Leica especially on the edge, which is quite a statement.

Comparing with the Swarovski ATX 95, both scopes delivered a very similar viewing experience with their respective 30-70x zoom. The image through the Swarovski had a bit more chromatic aberrations especially toward the edge. It was also slightly colder than the Kowa, as the result the image through the Kowa seemed more neutral and more contrasty. With both eyepieces the Kowa performed better in backlit situation, with less flare and glare, retaining a better contrast overall than the Austrian scope.



Bluethroat male, image shot with the Kowa TSN 99 + TE-80XW

Now, let's talk about the fixed wide-angle TE-80XW. The combination of a large 99mm fluorite crystal and a 40x eyepiece with 80° viewing angle create a big "wow factor". The first thing you can notice is the huge field of view, almost as large as the Leica set at 25x and larger than the Swarovski 95 set at 30x, very immersive view indeed. The sharpness was outstanding all the way up to the edge. Chromatic aberrations were invisible in the image centre and almost non-existent at the edge. This is simply the lowest I have seen since using top-end optics. The contrast was excellent and the colour rendition very neutral.

Compare to a regular full-size scope (80/85mm objective lens) I could really see a jump in brightness in every lighting conditions.



The TE-80XW is big and it's slightly heavier than the zoom.

I also had the opportunity to shoot some images through the scope. Image quality is very high, so much so that you could say it was shot with a professional camera and a long prime telephoto lens. Simply the best results I have ever seen in a scope.

Summary:

This new Kowa scope is beautifully made with a pleasing design and both, optical and mechanical performance are absolutely outstanding. That's what you are paying for with this top-quality optic, almost 3800 euros with the eyepiece. Although the price is very high, it remains slightly more affordable than other premium scopes on the market.

Is the Kowa TSN 99 worth the price, then? Yes absolutely!
Now bird enthusiasts must know about this scope (one of the best, if not the best in terms of optics), which is not quite the case here in France.



SYLVAIN PAUL MAURY
WWW.PAULMAURY.COM

PAUL IS A GLOBAL BIRDER, BIRD GUIDE AND WILDLIFE FILMMAKER, PASSIONATE ABOUT EVERYTHING BIRDY SINCE ITS CHILDHOOD. HE HAS BEEN USING AND TESTING TOP QUALITY OPTICS FOR OVER A DECADE.