

# Keys to Good Optics Use

*Optics are a double-edged sword...*

By Lenny Hoover

I was on a rocky crag, just in the shadows. I was quite a distance from the desert floor. I had been looking for sheep and my eyes and mind were tired.

I moved my eye from my Bushnell Spacemaster II spotting scope and looked from the mountain I was viewing to the floor of the desert below me. Movement caught my eye. I picked up my 10 by 50 binoculars and leaned into the mountain to gain stability. I could make out four figures under a Palo Verde tree's shade.

I was hunting 3 miles from the border of Mexico. I figured they were illegal aliens taking a break from the hot sun or perhaps sleeping after traveling at night. I slowly swiveled the spotting scope and could make out their faces when I focused the instrument.

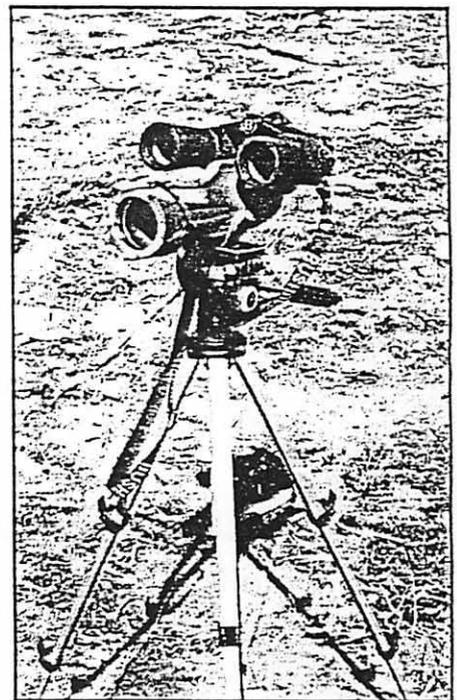
All wore old clothes and had straw hats on. Two of the men were Mexicans and two looked to be oriental. If the men were illegal aliens, what would two oriental men be sneaking across the border for? I will leave you to make guesses as to their reasons for entering the U.S. in such a fashion. Perhaps they were just ordinary citizens catching some desert sun in the middle of nowhere.

The above example bears witness to the fact that optics are a double-edged sword. They can be used to spot and identify game or men. Both of these purposes are of vital interest to the survivalist. Most people know little about selection of quality optics or the keys to their proper use. I will try to shed some light on the latter topic as it is the subject of this article.

There are four keys to being effective with optical instruments, whether they are spotting scopes, some form of binocular, monocular or to a lesser



A wide carrying strap is helpful and more comfortable when using binocular field optics.



Here is one way to keep both a spotting scope and binoculars stable.

degree, rifle scope. They are: 1. Quality Optics. 2. Stability. 3. The skill of the optical instrument's user. 4. Techniques of proper optics use.

**Stability** — You must get this principle down before you can be really effective with optics. Many of us have watched the crosshairs of our rifle scope dance across a target or deer without settling on the kill zone or bullseye. That's because the rifle or its rest was not steady.

Of course the key to stabilizing a rifle might be a tighter sling wrap on your arm, a lower power on your variable scope, a bipod or better shooting rest, control of your breathing or other things.

When using binoculars a good tripod is needed, using your body as one just like a metal tripod for a camera or spotting scope. By using your butt and two feet you form a tripod with your body, anchor both elbows on the meaty part of your legs just below the knees as if you were shooting in the sitting position.

If you can lean your back against a stable object like a rock or tree you become more stable and your field of view is steadier.

While some can stand and view effectively with binoculars, I always sit down or lay down leaning my head on a coat or rock. This is another very stable position. As you get older both your eyes and ability to keep binocu-



This Boone and Crockett Pronghorn antelope was taken with the aid of good optics.

lars steady decay. This means you need to take advantage of proper stability. The larger your magnification in any optical instrument, the more difficult it is to achieve good stability.

Choose an instrument you can effectively stabilize. Do not deceive yourself. 10 by 50s are generally too large for the average user and I feel more comfortable myself with an 8 by 42. The larger ones tire my eyes quicker.

A walking stick can be used in a standing position as the third leg of a tripod formed by it and your two legs. Simply place the binocular on the top of the staff in a firm grip. Binoculars can be placed atop a spotting scope which is already mounted on a tripod.

Wind can ruin stability by moving your body when upright or shaking the spotting scope mounted on a tripod. Set up your observation points out of the wind.

**Skill of the Optics User** — Just like shooting, a skilled optics user has spent many hours practicing or using the instrument. Do not expect to whip out binoculars and be effective with them immediately.

When using optics to locate man or beast remember that it is far more likely to spot a part of him than the

whole silhouette. I have found many more antlers, hooves, boots or hands than I have a whole deer or man. When glassing densely foliated areas all you may see is a small part of what you are searching for. A fellow once told me that a friend of his had spotted a nice deer by its shadow alone. By learning to spot what looks a bit out of place you soon will be spotting more things that you are searching for with your optics.

Movement always is a dead giveaway. Sometimes even the twitch of an ear or tail can draw your attention. It is important to remember that the optics user must keep movement to a minimum and choose observation posts which will conceal any movement and conceal the human shape.

When viewing an area start with your eyes and look for the giveaway indicators, movement, unnatural shapes or colors, like a white tail on a deer or the straight line of a man-made object. After a good look with the naked eye try binoculars. You may wish to move up to a spotting scope if you still have not found what you want. If you have spotted something, a spotting scope will help you get a much closer look.

Be patient. If you are hunting seri-

ously spend at least 70 percent of your time using optics. You will see much more without being seen than crawling through the brush or walking endless miles. During my sheep hunt my guide and I would spend half a day at a time in one location without any substantial movement.

You must continually ask yourself as you look at each field of view, what is that in the shadow or behind that tree, crevice or boulder? Make sure you know what every single item is in that particular look.

Depending on how well you wish to search, you may wish to recheck what you or someone else has already looked at. Remember that a bedded down deer or man may be hidden behind something when resting. Be patient and thorough.

Fight distraction and drowsiness. Constantly tell yourself mentally that in the next field of view or two will be that big buck you have always dreamed about and one time he will be there!

**Techniques of Proper Optics Use** — The following are some simple tricks I have been taught or have learned on my own. When using binoculars use the thumbs and back of the hands to

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Systematically cover all terrain when using a spotting scope or other optical instrument.

shade out sidelight at the eyepiece. By doing this you will make the instrument's field of view brighter to the eye and be less distracted.

The same technique will work if you place your regular or camo shirt over your head as if you were an old-fashioned photographer covered by his black cape.

This last technique works well with binoculars but really comes into its own when used with a quality spotting scope. The rumpled shirt on your head will also distort your silhouette so that it will be harder to visually identify you. To rest your eye which is not being used when using a spotting scope, try wearing an eye patch like the type a person who is blind in one eye uses. This will cut down sidelight and it helps one concentrate more diligently.

While we're on the subject of resting one's eyes, be sure that you get a good night's sleep when you will be using optics for a long period of time. Haze, reflection, parallax, bright sun and continual concentration will strain your eyes, not to mention causing headaches.

Keeping your eyes open for long periods of time tends to make them dry out. Use an eye wash with soothing characteristics like Visine or Murine. They will let you start each day with fresh, cool eyes.

If you are using variable binoculars or spotting scopes and you begin to develop headaches, try cutting down

on the magnification. Full power is not needed all the time. Save it for pinpointing an object or scoring a game animal.

When carrying binoculars in the field for long periods of time use a wide strap. My pet peeve is to buy a \$400 binocular and find a ¼-inch plastic binocular strap inside. A two-inch strap is far more comfortable. It will not chafe you when placed behind your shirt or coat collar. The GI utility strap is perfect for the job.

Be systematic when scoping a mountain, canyon or any other large amount of terrain with binoculars and especially spotting scopes. I generally start at one end of the terrain feature (like a mountain) and move down till I reach the bottom of the mountain.

Imagine concentric circles like the olympic games symbol. Each circle represents a field of view or look. As you move down the mountain to its base be sure that each field of view or circle overlaps the next by as much as ¼ to ½.

When you reach the mountain's bottom, start back up towards the top. Your new row of circles should overlap your last row by ¼ to ½ again. Each field of view should cover or overlap its immediate neighboring field of view or circle. This method will guarantee that you leave nothing overlooked if you concentrate.

Be sure to look closely at shadows

under bushes and those caused by mountains or ridges. This extra darkness conceals both man and animal well. In the same vein check shadow lines carefully. An animal half in shade and half in light is easily distorted and unrecognizable. Look closely and concentrate. Remember that what you're looking for is always just one field of view away.

Remember too, that antelope, goats and sheep have eight-power vision and an enemy aggressor may have optics as good as you or better.

When setting up an observation post for man or animal pay close attention to camouflaging yourself, binoculars and other equipment. I like to scope from a shadowed area even if it is just that of a boulder or large bush.

If you can surround yourself with deadfall, brush, boulders or whatever, so much the better.

Remember the things that help you spot your prey so that the tables are not turned on you someday. These principles take time to learn and have to become second nature. Try hard and give it time.

I thought I was good with optics until a professional sheep guide taught me a thing or two. I saw him spot an animal by just seeing five inches of horn behind a rock. We had to have been a mile and a half away. With practice you can become that good. I hope to! By the way, good hunting. ●