

A shot in the dark

Once the sole preserve of the military, the starlight scope has come of age for the modern hunter. There's a choice of night vision products available – so how do you help your customers find what's right for them and their needs?

When it comes to purchasers of specialist optical equipment, customers broadly fall into two types: those who want to buy because they can afford to, and those who buy because they need to. But buying this kind of product isn't a simple purchasing decision – in fact, it's highly complex.

Many night hunters – be they airgunners or firearms shooters – prefer low-cost gun-mounted lamps and filters. But the ability to see and shoot without blindingly obvious illumination is an attractive concept, as it reduces the likelihood of spooking the quarry and improves the chance of a shot.

And for those involved in serious vermin and pest control, night vision (NV) equipment is pretty much essential. The cost of a decent quality sight might, though, seem prohibitive, with an investment of £1,000 being a typical starting figure.

That may be a fair price for a top class Schmidt & Bender tactical daylight scope, for example, but NV products at similar price points have less utility – they only really see use after dark, meaning that many recreational shooters consider them expensive, and may well be content with less sophisticated, cheaper equipment.

Russian revolution

Much of the thrust of progress in NV came through the former Soviet Bloc countries, where this equipment was first generation military equipment. Of course, there have been gigantic leaps forward since the fall of the Soviet Union. The original generation designs with their low magnification and limited practical range have been superseded by newer units. But if it's top of the range your customer is after, then there's unlikely to be much change out of £5,000 – and who wants to tie up that sort of money in stock?

Units made to the original first generation specifications are still available, priced to retail at between £260-



Deben's D-141 M – note the larger size in comparison to a daylight riflescope

£1,000. Like so many things, it's a trade-off for the customer – the cheaper scopes work but there's a big performance difference between earlier and later spec models.

Much of this equipment is still designed and manufactured in Russia – there's not much to choose between many of these particular makes, as the designs tend to be generic. The two big names in the field are Hebridean Tech House and Deben Group Industries. The only real domestic player is Starlight NV Limited, although Hebridean Tech House has emerged as a manufacturer and wholesaler from its sister retail company, Soviet Bazaar, though the group's main focus is now on trade supplies.

How Night Vision scopes work

Though they share similarities with ordinary rifle scopes, night vision units are quite different. They work by magnifying any available light and the image is presented to the eye in green and white. Magnification power is kept as low as possible to retain image clarity, limiting the distances at which the scope can be used

effectively. It makes sense to advise potential buyers that this is just the way it is with NV scopes – a necessary evil, as even the top-of-the-range night vision equipment can never quite match the performance of sights designed for clear daylight.

The best units are generally good out to 200 yards; middle-of-the-range scopes to about 100-150 yards; and entry-level models are fine for work at 50-100 yards. Again, talking to your customers about how they propose to use their NV equipment helps prevent them shelling out unnecessarily or conversely helps them to see why they might want to spend extra. Airgun hunters, for example, are inherently limited due to the short ranges at which quarry will be taken; riflemen, though, will want something that reaches 100 yards plus comfortably.

The reticle systems on some of the earlier specification night scopes leave much to be desired – many models use chevrons, bars and even dots, which are hardly stunning. Later generation scopes have now, thankfully, tended to adopt the now extremely familiar Mil-Dot reticle.

Avoid bright light

An important point to remember for the would-be NV purchaser is that these units can be seriously damaged by normal daylight if switched on. Full exposure can result in a burned-out internal tube, which will render the entire unit useless. Of course, an NV scope needs to be zeroed like any other, and this is best done on the range during daylight hours. To prevent damage, they all come with a removable pinhole lens cover. The tiny aperture in this cover allows in just enough light to zero the equipment without damaging the internals, and some units offer special zeroing targets, which makes life a little easier.

At the eyepiece end, there's usually a concertina bellows-style eyecup which seals the eyepiece to the eye, which prevents light entering the rear of the scope and thereby possibly causing damage to it. From a personal safety point of view, it's important to warn your customers that while car headlights might not do much harm to the internal tube itself, they'll do little for the eyesight if viewed through the intensified illumination of a night scope.



Night vision equipment – once solely a military tool and now available for sporting use

NIGHT VISION EQUIPMENT



The Odyssey NONO3 Nightvision Monocular – just one of a range from American company Night Owl Optics (distributed in the UK by Airgun Sport)

Optical solutions

Night vision equipment doesn't just mean hi-tech telescopic rifle sights – both binoculars and monoculars are readily available and can also be used after dark. These can be particularly useful additions to the shop's stock – their relatively low cost and versatility means that they will always be a popular choice with customers, with dedicated night vision versions available in addition to ordinary optics.

This type of equipment is often used as part of a two-lamp set-up, in which one half of the partnership indicates the quarry with NV equipment, points the shooter in the general direction, and when ready, illuminates the surrounding area with a lamp immediately before the shot fired.

Another option to consider is that it's possible to boost the power of a night scope by adding an infra-red torch or laser to the existing device. These products bathe the target in additional light, improving vision. Some modern scopes have built-in torches, while others have a space for

them to be fitted externally. NV laser projectors are another option, and work along similar lines – they can be used to designate a target, with a dot showing up as a bright green spot, adjustable as simply as a modern daylight rifle scope.

Lastly, night vision goggles are another option – but apart from looking like something out of *The Fly*, many people find wearing them intrusive.

Products and prices

Low-range early designs, such as the Starlight Aurora 150, start at around £260. This particular unit includes an integral infra-red illuminator and magnification of 2.8x. Its short range means that it's really only suitable for airguns and .22 rimfires. Moving up, there's the Soviet Bazaar Mini Osprey 2.5x, which retails at around £599. Starlight's D470 comes in at about £1,000.

A selection of infra-red torches – these can help improve the performance of NV scopes



This second-generation device has a larger magnification of 3.3x, and comes with illuminated reticule and infra-red illuminator (it's rated by the consumer press as among the best value models available).

Deben offers the Tactical Riflescope DN1805 at £599 – one of the first generation of NV units – while the company also sells the next-generation DN2805, priced to sell at some £1,529 but giving much brighter images.

NV monoculars can cost as little as £150, and usually peak at around £200 for early-design units, the price point at which infra-red torches and lasers start. Binoculars will come in at a bit extra, usually around the £400-500 mark. Other monocular manufacturers include American company Night Owl, who produce the Odyssey NONO3 Nightvision, distributed in the UK by Airgun Sport (Simmons).



Starlight's D470 is considered good value for money by the consumer press at under £1,000



A night scope pinhole lens cover – this unit rotates, opening up small slots which allow the unit to be zeroed in daylight



Monoculars can be worn on a head harness, leaving the hands free

Night Vision goggles start from as low as £300 and can be priced at £5,000-plus for the really top end makes.

It remains a strong

perception in most consumers' minds that the higher up the price ladder you go, the better the product you get. So if you customer wants the

best, and money is no object, then shelling out a figure of around £6,000 will acquire him the Kite – an absolutely top notch, third-generation NV scope that sees battlefield use by the British Army. This device provides exceptionally bright images, and while no NV product can match the images produced by a decent daylight scope, this is about as close as it gets with current technology and the build quality is second-to-none.

Of course, it's not an item your average customer will be able to afford but it's as close as it gets to perfection, a scope that dedicated centre-fire rifle shooters will fawn over. Any takers?



HTH-110 NV binoculars from Hebridean Tech House. This design includes two infra-red projectors – one for each intensifier tube.



The Odyssey NON03 Nightvision Monocular – just one of a range of from American company Night Owl Optics (distributed in the UK by Airgun Sport)

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