GROUP GEAR TEST The UK's most trusted sailing kit tests

Bosun's Chairs

Chris Beeson sends Dick Durham aloft to test six bosun's chairs to find out which warrants a place in your locker

You never know when or where you might need to re-run a halyard, replace a nav light bulb, rewire your VHF radio antenna or straighten a bent windex, but Sod's Law says there won't be a rigger around to do it for you.

Besides the ability to make these repairs with nothing more than a couple of stout friends to mind the halyards on which you go aloft, a good bosun's chair means you're not put off going up during the season to check spreader roots and tips, rigging terminals and sheaves – in short, to conduct the sort of routine maintenance to which all yachtsmen should aspire.

A bosun's chair can be as simple as a couple of bights of rope, one for the legs, one for the back, using a Spanish or Portuguese bowline. If you try it, though, you'll find out soon enough that the lines scythe into your legs and back, crushing you with your own weight. Another simple chair is a bottom-sized plank with holes drilled in each corner and two bights of rope threaded through transversely (so you still have support if the plank breaks), forming two bridles. It's better than two bights because the plank, or seat, supports your weight, but it's an arrangement that's easy to capsize, allowing you to fall out backwards.

'A good chair means you're not put off routine maintenance'



There's a lot going on at the masthead of most yachts and it all needs looking after. You must be comfortable if you're going up there for an hour or two

WHAT MAKES A GOOD CHAIR?

A good bosun's chair needs to be be comfortable, so that you're not hurrying to finish a job while aloft. It needs back support to prevent capsize and allow you to work two-handed rather than hanging onto the supporting halyard in terror. For the same reason it needs a crotch strap – or something similar – to stop you slipping out forward, as you might while stretching up to reach the masthead. It should be sturdily built of quality materials and easily inspected. It needs big secure pockets so you can take aloft everything you need to do the job – and be sure nothing falls out. On top of that it should pack down small and have a bag for the lot.

How we tested them

PHOTOS: BOB AYLOTT

Knowing what makes a good bosun's chair is one thing, but finding one that will suit you is another thing entirely. So, to save you from extended arguments with suppliers as you try to return a chair you find you don't like, we've done all the hanging around for you. We gathered together six bosun's chairs, all currently available on today's market (through chandlers or directly through the dealer or manufacturer) to take a close look at their features and discover exactly how user-friendly and – just as important – how comfortable they are. We took them down to Ocean Village Marina in Southampton to test them aboard John Simpson's Warrior 40 MkII, *Chiscos* (featured in *Me & my boat*, p72) on a cold winter's morning. Despite the biting easterly that fired bullets of rain from an iron-grey sky, we put our volunteer monkey – *YM*'s veteran news editor, Dick Durham – into each seat for around 15 minutes, dangling him just above the deck so we could take photographs and limit any damage to the boat, should he fall onto it. We interrogated him to find out how secure he felt – first, leaning forward as if working at the masthead, then leaning back as if inspecting a spreader tip. He didn't need much encouragement to tell us how comfortable he was, and how the available adjustments affected this. We also made a note of the size of the pockets and how easily he could reach into them before we finally brought him back down and thawed him out with a hot drink – then sent him up again.



Does the bosun's chair come with a stowage bag to keep it protected?



Is it easy to reach the pockets – and how big are they?



You may be up there some time, so is it comfortable?



Can you lean back without feeling you'll tip out?



RIGHT: Spinlock recommends that you fasten the chair's halyard with a bowline and two half-hitches



ABOVE: At the masthead, the seat will tip forward. Are you still safe?

Safety first

Aside from making it easier to take photos, the other reason to test the chairs so low was that we had Dick leaning backwards, trying to capsize the seat. Had he come out, he wouldn't have had far to fall. Having been to the masthead Dick noted that, when the knot meets the sheeve, the seat is inevitably tipped forward so he wanted to make sure he was secure leaning forward.

We raised him on two halyards: one main halyard used for the hoisting, and another safety halyard, tailed by Bob Aylott, our photographer, to take the weight as he went up and catch him if the first halyard failed. It's important not to attach halyards using their shackles as they have been known to open unexpectedly. We were going to use a bowline on a bight but instead we used a method recommended in a leaflet attached to the Spinlock chair, which is a bowline with two half-hitches in the tail. We used this for main and safety lines and had no problems.

For the test results, see p86



Instead of a back strap there's an adjustable waist belt and leg straps

Crewsaver Crewlift 40 £59.99

This has a maximum load of 100kg – fine for Dick but it rules me out. The plywood seat removes for replacement and is supported by two easily inspected webbing straps that end in stainless D-rings. Instead of a back strap there is an adjustable waist belt, and adjustable leg straps instead of a crotch strap. There are two smallish Velcro-close bags with small plastic clips, but no open stowage bag. The back support felt rather low (though the belt and leg straps should prevent capsize) and when leaning forward the waist constricted. It is, however, secure with a good seat. Dick said: 'I didn't relish going up in this one – it's for a younger man with a lot more upper body strength.'





ABOVE: The long webbing straps force you to sit back a little LEFT: The low backrest didn't boost Dick's sense of security

CONTACT Crewsaver
TEL 023 9252 [illegible]
WEBSITE www.crewsaver.co.uk



The only chair on test without a solid seat

Banks B Type £61

Two easily inspected webbing slings meet at stainless D-rings and support a tough PVC seat, 'like a giant nappy,' said Dick. An adjustable leg strap serves to prevent falling out and a webbing strap provides back support. There's just one Velcro-close pocket sewn onto the right hand side. 'It feels very secure,' said Dick. 'I can lean back no problem, but with no rigid seat it pinches your thighs together, making you knock-kneed. When I lean forward there's more support under the thighs but they're still pinched together.' The advantage of having no seat is that it can stow very small – but there's no bag to stow it in.





ABOVE: The higher backrest with webbing strap felt safer LEFT: With no rigid seat, the chair squeezes your legs together

CONTACT Banks [illegible]
TEL 023 [illegible]
WEBSITE [illegible]



Very light with good support, but not the most comfortable chair on test

Spinlock Mast Pro £89.95



Stows very small in a neat mesh bag

More of a harness than a chair, it's very light and stows very small in its own mesh bag for easy drying. It comprises two leg supports attached to a waist belt with a webbing loop to attached halyards. Everything is adjustable and the buckles have neoprene covers to prevent scratching on the mast. It can be used with ascenders to get up a mast singlehanded. There's stowage for a marline spike and two loops with 5kg maximum loads but very little else. 'There's good support but it's a bit of a ball-crusher,' said Dick. 'And can feel pressure in all the straps. It is very secure but not the most comfortable – I wouldn't want to be up there long.



The four stainless steel buckles have neoprene covers to help protect the mast

CONTACT Spinlock
TEL 01983 295555
WEBSITE www.spinlock.co.uk



It may look home-made but it's well designed

YACHTING MONTHLY
Best all-rounder

Swi-Tec Bosun's Chair £131.35

This looks like it's been cobbled together from a director's chair, a rolling pin and a dressing gown cord but it seems solid enough and has its own stowage bag. It's built from sail cover fabric with four pockets, plenty of loops and fastenings and a plywood seat. Most of the weight is borne by the rope forward and spread by the wooden bar to prevent any squeezing anywhere, while a webbing crotch strap keeps you in place. The back support is high and the gap between it and the seat allows you to sit well back. 'It feels like a normal chair,' said Dick. 'It's a proper, old-school design with terrific back support.'





ABOVE: Dick was comfortable and secure enough to be able to work hands-free LEFT: The high backrest makes it feel like a camping chair

CONTACT Blue Water Sailcraft
TEL 01534 739594
WEB www.bluewatersailcraft.com



YACHTING MONTHLY
Recommended

The only padded seat on test, it comes with plenty of adjustment options

Banks A Type £179

This won our last test, so we expected it to be good – and it was. Made from a sturdy two-ply sail cover fabric, it features heavy-duty seams that support the only padded chair we tested and has two Velcro-close pockets sewn on either side for kit, the right bigger than the left, but no stowage bag. It was also set apart by having adjustable crossover back straps that, together with the adjustable waist strap and crotch strap, give you a tremendous feeling of security. 'It's firm and secure with plenty of adjustment,' said Dick. 'You can lean right back because of the back straps and get both hands to work. It's one of the best chairs I've ever sat in! I'd be happy to spend the whole day up there in this.'





ABOVE: The crossover backstraps bring an amazing feeling of security LEFT: Dick tightens the backstraps to bring himself upright

CONTACT Banks Sails
TEL 023 9252 8621
WEB www.banks.co.uk



Simple, strong and very sturdy with no difficult pressure points

Plastimo Professional £203.10

This is a heavy-duty vinyl bucket chair, maximum load 700kg, with a seat sewn in and supported by three easily inspected webbing slings, and another webbing strap looped across the two sides with a single stainless D ring. The crotch strap also runs through the D ring and there's a high, secure backrest with an adjustment strap on the right hand side. It comes in a vinyl stowage bag that cleverly clips on with a plastic clip to double as a kit bag when going aloft. 'It's comfortable and secure,' said Dick. 'It has no pressure points, and the backrest adjustment means you can pull it tighter around the waist. I'm not sure about the plastic clip, though. It's a good idea but I'd want something stronger.'





ABOVE: A third strap around the high backrest adds to security LEFT: The stowage bag clips on to add more space for kit

CONTACT Bainbridge Marine
SEE website for nearest dealer
WEB www.bainbridgemarine.co.uk/map.aspx

The results

Every piece of kit *Yachting Monthly* tests is thoroughly examined against three key criteria

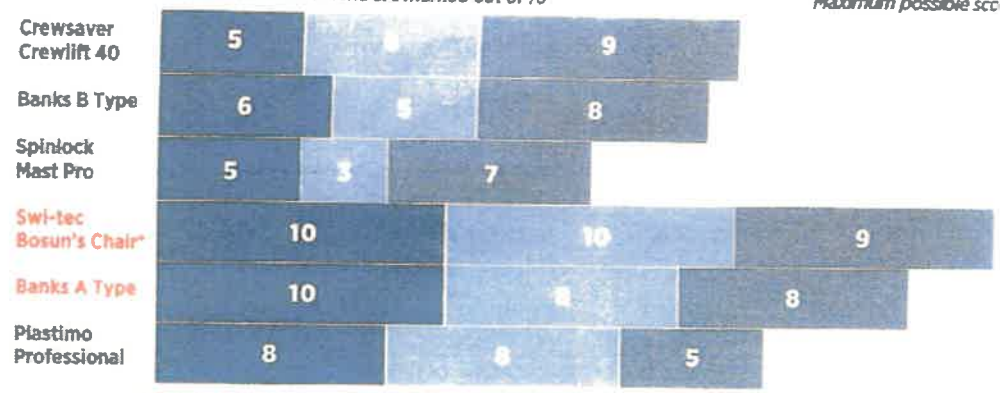
Performance
How comfortable? Is it secure leaning forward and backward? Can you work hands-free?

Ease of use
How much kit can it take aloft? Does it have its own stowage bag? Is it easy to put on?

Value for money
For its performance and ease of use, does it justify the pricetag? Is it really worth the money?

Each of our three criteria are marked out of 10

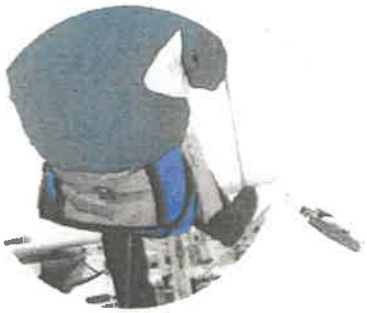
Maximum possible score



*Yachting Monthly recommended product - see conclusion below

Conclusion

With the exception of the Crewsaver (which I'm embarrassed to say couldn't support my 16st weight) I'd happily go aloft in any of these chairs. And with the exception of the Spinlock (which has hardly anywhere to put tools and kit), I could get there with everything I needed to do the job. The Spinlock is, however, the only one that's practical to use solo, climbing harness-style: the others all need at least one crewman on deck, preferably two.



We learned that a chair needs a high backrest for comfort and security



The Swi-Tec is as comfy as a garden chair in the air – happy days!

The Banks B Type has no rigid seat to spread the load with the result that it squeezes the legs, hips and waist, so while it's secure, it's not terribly comfortable.

The Crewsaver is the cheapest on test and appears very well made but its low back support also means it's not one you'd care to work aloft in for any great length of time, particularly two-handed. The Plastimo is extremely sturdy with remarkable load bearing. It is also comfortable and secure, but the plastic clip fastening the stowage-cum-toolbag is at odds with its status as the most expensive on test, so that raises value for money concerns.

Our two favourites in this group were the Banks A Type and the Swi-Tec. If you're working two-handed out at the end of spreaders, leaning back a lot, then the Banks A is best because the shoulder straps absolutely prevent capsize – and it has a padded seat. For everything else, though, the Swi-Tec was the most comfortable, secure and easiest chair to use. It has its own bag too and doesn't cost the earth, so that's our winner.



The Banks A Type chair is well-designed with conveniently adjustable shoulder straps

YACHTING MONTHLY
Best all-rounder

Swi-Tec Bosun's Chair

Outstanding in every area: affordable, comfortable, secure, and very easy to use

£131.35



YACHTING MONTHLY
Recommended

Banks A Type

With shoulder straps that prevent capsize, this is excellent for work that requires leaning back

£179



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