

Three Sweet .243 Bolt Actions: Browning, Ruger, & Remington

This trio of light-kicking varmint/deer rifles showed incredible accuracy and presented a tough question: Which one to buy?

In November 2004, Sturm Ruger introduced the Ruger M77 Mark II Frontier Rifle, a compact rifle designed to accept a front-mounted scope. Unusual (but not unique) was its forward scope-mounting rib, a nod to the Scout Rifle design idea, and its lightweight, very short barrel. Of the gun, Sturm Ruger President Stephen L. Sanetti, said, "The ability to mount a scope out front on the barrel rib allows the shooter to keep both eyes open, providing a wider field of view and instant target acquisition. The front-mounted scope also provides long eye relief, which is important in rifles chambered for powerful magnum cartridges."

The Ruger M77 Mark II Frontier Rifle featured a blued steel action and a 16.5-inch hammer-forged barrel bedded in a grey laminate stock. Ruger rolled the gun out in 7mm-08 Rem., .243 Win., .308 Win., and .300 WSM, and its factory spec had its weight as a trim 6.5 pounds unloaded. Naturally, we thought this was an intriguing gun in a traditional niche.

Forthwith, then, we started looking for lightweight matchups to pit against the Ruger, and found them aplenty, but we weren't able to locate guns with tubes quite as short as the Frontier's. That's okay, we said, because it was our guess that the Ruger's short barrel would possibly doom it in two crucial areas: velocity and accuracy. Also, the gun's fairly high MSRP put it at risk of being undercut substantially on price.

To see how the Frontier competed, we acquired a Ruger and two other short, lightweight guns from Remington and Browning with different

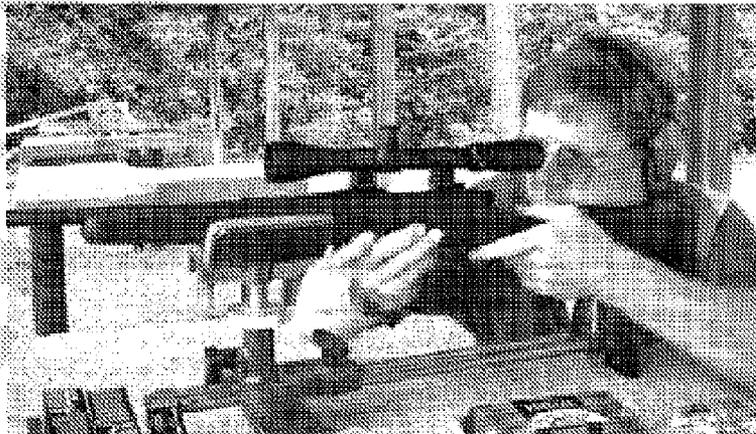
barrel lengths and a range of pricing. The Ruger was a .243 M77 FRBBZ-MKII, \$800 MSRP.

Our other test guns were the Browning A-Bolt II Micro Hunter No. 0350202111, a 6.25-pound gun with a 20-inch blued barrel, #684; and the Remington 700 SPS Youth No. 27475, a less expensive synthetic-stocked gun that weighed 6.75 pounds unloaded. Because of its \$400 street price (MSRP: \$510), an Alaskan sheep-hunter GT reader had recommended his .308-chambered SPS "youth" gun as a steal, opining that because it was marketed to beginners, it was priced lower than similar guns. We found his recommendation to be right on the mark, along with the SPS's ability to shoot.

Our test ammo for these .243s

showed a range of utility designed to express flaws in the barrels' rifling (we thought). From lightest to heaviest, they were Federal Premium Vital-Shok 85-grain Sierra Gameking boattail hollow points, No. P243D; Winchester Supreme 95-grain Ballistic Silvertips, No. SBST243A; and Remington's Express Core-Lokt 100-grain pointed soft points, No. R243W3. Also, as part of barrel break-in, we shot Remington 80-grain Express Rifle rounds, No. 243W1, but we did not collect accuracy or chronograph data with these rounds.

We shot the guns at a private gun club north of Houston, with the test conditions being around 78 degrees and about 60 percent humidity. There was no wind during our accuracy session, which likely helped us



Product Coordination Editor Ben Brooks was impressed with all three .243s, but he may have been most surprised by the inexpensive Remington SPS Youth gun. It shot the best groups with the lightest bullet weights, Federal 85-grain rounds, and cost hundreds of dollars less than the Ruger and Browning rifles. Still, in part because he's not a fan of black guns, he preferred Ruger's new Frontier rifle.