

Varmint Rifles

THE FIVE CHECK-RATED MODELS WERE ACCURATE ENOUGH TO HIT SMALL VARMINTS AT LONG RANGES

The varmint hunter is in some ways more fortunate than his fellow Nimrods who go out for big game. He can usually hunt near home in any season and without limit on his bag; and some farmers, bedeviled by crows, woodchucks and such, will allow the varmint hunter to shoot in their fields.

But while an old .30-30 may still bring home the venison, the varmint hunter needs a long-range precision rifle. It will normally be a rifle chambered for a cartridge with a rather heavy powder charge and a comparatively light bullet of small diameter. That combination results in a flat trajectory and long effective range (up to about 400 yards for some calibers), and in a bullet that tends to disintegrate when it hits an obstacle, rather than ricochet dangerously.

Varmint hunters have used many calibers, from the little .22 Long Rifle to the .30-06. At the lower extreme, you have a short-range cartridge with a slow-moving, high-trajectory bullet that ricochets easily—not suitable or safe for most varminting. At the other extreme, you have a big-game cartridge, that has a large-diameter bullet with too high a trajectory for accuracy over long range, plus a lot of recoil and a report loud enough to make your ears ring and to startle someone taken unawares. In between is anyone's land. The venerable .22 Hornet is on the small side by today's standards and seems to have lost much of its popularity. And the famed .220 Swift, which delivered higher velocity and flatter trajectory than any commercial cartridge before or since, proved to have drawbacks. (It was extremely loud, some claimed it tended to wear out barrels rapidly, and its relatively light bullet was too easily deflected by the wind, among other things.)

Among the most popular varmint-hunting cartridges today are the .222 Remington and the .22-250 Remington. The .222 has an effective range of up to about 300 yards and a relatively mild report; the .22-250 has a maximum effective range of about 400 yards, but a considerably bigger bang. On the advice of our consultants, we decided to limit our report largely to rifles of those two calibers. Two other calibers, the .243 Winchester and the .244 Remington, have been widely used for varmint shooting in the West. But they're a bit heavy for varmints smaller than the coyote or fox, and a bit loud for use away from the wide open spaces.

We purchased 13 models in 11 major brands. Eight rifles were .22-250s and four were .222s (models available in both calibers were tested in .22-250). The other tested rifle, the popular Winchester 70, was not available in either cali-

ber at the time we purchased our test models, although it's now being made in .22-250. Our Winchester fired a .225 caliber bullet, slightly shorter in range than the .22-250.

All the models we tested are repeaters, except for the top-rated Ruger. That unique rifle has a dropping-block, single-shot action. You operate it by pushing down a hinged lever extending beneath the trigger guard.

The rifle versus the varmint

Above all, the varmint rifle must be accurate. A bullet that hits the target a couple of inches off your aiming point can still bring down a deer, but it may completely miss a prairie dog, crow or woodchuck. To meet our consultants' standard of accuracy for a rifle often called upon to hit small targets at long distances, a rifle must be capable of grouping all its shots within a circle of about one inch diameter at 100 yards (one minute of angle, or MOA). We fitted each rifle with a high-quality, high-powered telescopic sight and, after a 50-shot "break-in," fired groups of five shots from a rest.

We tested all the rifles with commercial ammunition and checked most of them with carefully hand-loaded ammunition as well. As would be expected, the rifles fired with both types of ammo proved more consistently accurate with the hand-loaded type than with the commercial product. The check-rated Trademarks, for example, shot slightly outside the MOA with commercial ammo, within the MOA with hand-loaded ammo.

Nine models were judged consistently capable of MOA accuracy with either type of ammunition. The H&R was only slightly outside the MOA limit; the Savage 340 and the similar Western Field were significantly further out.

We checked the fired cases for excessive expansion. All checked out satisfactorily, indicating that cases fired in these rifles could probably be reloaded up to about 20 or 30 times.

While firing for accuracy, we judged the quality of the trigger pull and the smoothness and ease of operation of the bolt and the repeating mechanism. As a group, our varmint rifles exhibited better trigger performance than most guns of other types CU has tested in the past. That is as it should be, since a good trigger pull—light and without noticeable creep—contributes greatly to the accuracy a varmint hunter must have. A pull of four to five pounds is about right. A heavier pull may cost you in steadiness; a lighter pull risks accidental discharge.

A You may have to adjust the trigger pull—or have a gunsmith do it—once you get the rifle home. We judged the trigger pulls on most of the tested rifles a little heavy as received, but the pull was adjustable on all but the three lowest-ranked models. Where a trigger showed noticeable creep, it's mentioned in the Ratings.

The lightest trigger pull was on the *Tradewinds*, which has a double-set trigger. To set the front trigger, the one that fires the rifle, you must first pull the rear trigger rather hard (about seven pounds on our sample). Then the front trigger responds to a pull that can safely be set very light indeed. Ours was adjusted for less than a one-pound pull.

The five check-rated models were judged very good in both trigger pull and mechanical operation (see table, page 158) and, of course, they were judged consistently capable of meeting the minimum MOA criterion, at least with hand-loaded ammunition.

The sixth-ranked rifle, the *Remington 700*, exhibited a potentially dangerous flaw at first tested. There was so little clearance between the trigger and the trigger guard that when the trigger was pulled with the safety on (something you or a friend might do when sighting down the rifle or trying it for feel), the trigger sometimes failed to return to its forward position. And with the trigger in the back position, the rifle would fire without warning the next time the safety was moved to the fire position. The malfunction persisted for more than 100 firings before the trigger wore in and performed normally. An unwary buyer might have caused a serious accident by then.

Although we judged the deficiency more a sample defect than a design shortcoming, we nevertheless downgraded the *Remington 700* because of it. We would warn anyone buy-

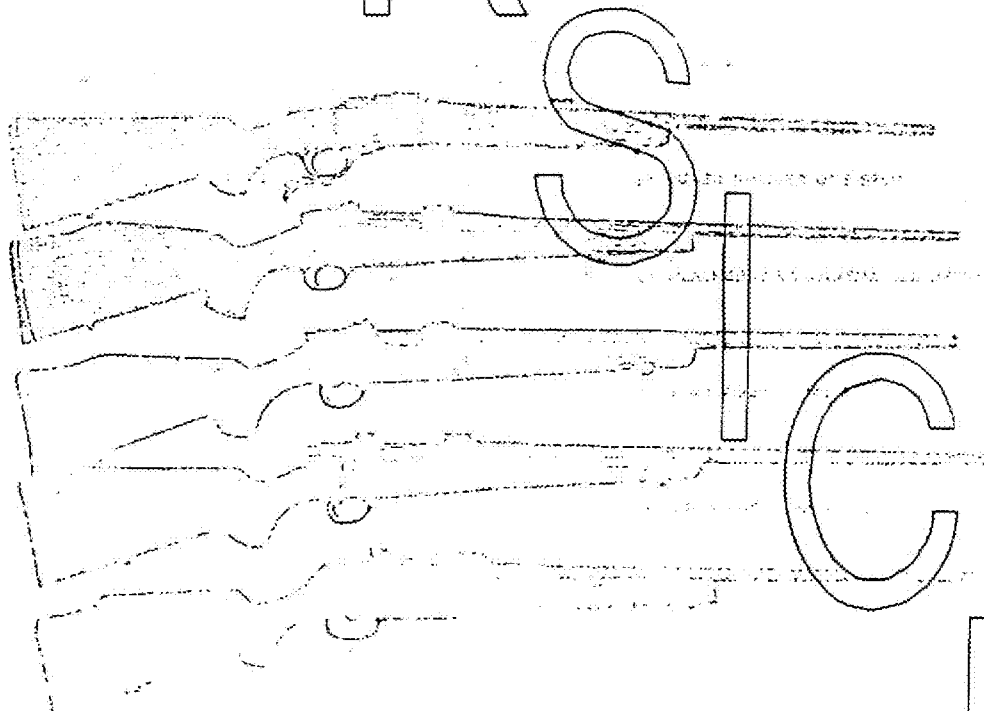
ing a rifle to test the safety in the store. If the trigger can be moved with the safety on, make sure it returns to its full forward position after you pull it.

We also gave weight in the Ratings to checkering and other grip-improving devices. Those qualities affect not only the appearance of the rifle (an important matter to many purchasers) but also the ease of holding and firing. Good, sharp checkering helps you keep a firm grip; a raised checkpiece helps you position your head for a good sighting picture. The stocks of all but five models (*Ruger*, *Savage 110C*, *Remington 788*, *Savage 340* and *Western Field*) had raised checkpieces, and all but the *Remington 788* had checkered grips and fore-ends. Cut checkering (formed by actual removal of wood) generally provides a better grip than impressed checkering. The *Ruger*, *Weatherby*, *Sako*, *Browning*, *Tradewinds*, *BSA* and *H&R* models had cut checkering. The *Winchester*, *Savage 110C*, *Savage 340* and *Western Field* had impressed checkering that we judged not sharp enough to help your grip much. The checkering on the *Remington 700*, though impressed, did provide enough friction to improve the grip.

Special needs, special features

The varmint hunter may drive around a good deal between shots, looking for his game. So he should be able to unload his rifle quickly, without working each cartridge through the action (it's dangerous to carry a loaded gun in a car, and usually illegal). With eight of the tested repeaters you could remove cartridges easily through a hinged floor plate at the bottom of the magazine. Five models had a removable box magazine, also judged satisfactory.

Rather than load and unload a magazine, many varmint



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hunters prefer to load a single cartridge into the chamber, since a missed varmint seldom stays put for a second shot anyway. The single-shot *Ruger*, judged the smoothest-operating model tested, was also judged the most convenient for loading a single cartridge.

The *Savage 340* and similar *Western Field* were the only tested rifles that were sometimes difficult to load singly. The tip of the cartridge occasionally jammed against the rear edge of the firing chamber.

The varmint hunter generally prefers a bolt action to other repeater actions. Its strength, rigidity and corresponding potential for accuracy recommend it. Except for the single-shot *Ruger*, all the tested models have bolt actions. And they are all drilled so that they can be fitted easily for telescope sights, which are essential for small targets at long ranges. The Ratings also note five models that are equipped with open iron sights. But open sights are next to useless for varmints at ranges beyond about 75 yards.

In the past, rifles made specifically for varmint shooting typically had heavier barrels than other rifles; heavy barrels presumably contributed to the accuracy varmint shooting demands. Among the tested models, only the *Winchester 70*, *Remington 700* and *Sako* were available with heavy barrels, an extra-cost option on each of them. The heavier barrels of those three did help in holding the rifle steady. But most varmint hunters shoot prone or from a rest; and our regular-barrel rifles shot about as accurately from a rest as did the heavy-barrel guns.

The sportsman who displays his guns in a rack or on a wall will want a rifle that is as good in looks as in performance. Some models are offered in several "grades," or price lines that differ from each other chiefly in finish and



To operate the double-set trigger on the Tradewinds, you first pull the rear trigger hard. That sets the front trigger for a light pull. As on most models, trigger pull is adjustable.

workmanship. Where a choice was offered, we bought the lowest grade. Some models, as the Table shows, were nevertheless judged high in quality of finish and workmanship.

Choosing your varmintier

The five check-rated models are rated about equal in those factors that may spell the difference between a hit and a miss. We rated the *Ruger* and the *Weatherby* above the other check-rated models because of their excellent finish and workmanship. However, those models are priced considerably higher than the *Sako Vixen* and *Browning Safari* (whose finish and workmanship were judged nearly as good) and more than \$100 higher than the *Tradewinds*, the other check-rated model. Keep in mind, too, that you can cut about \$15 from the price of the *Sako* by buying it with a standard barrel. For a utility or knockabout gun with good accuracy, the *Remington 788*, listed at \$84.95, or the *Savage 110C*, at \$127.50, would be good buys.

CHARACTERISTICS AND SPECIFICATIONS OF VARMINT RIFLES

(KEY: E, Excellent; VG, Very Good; G, Good; F, Fair)

ACCEPTABLE—Very Good

✓ <i>RUGER NUMBER ONE S26M</i>	VG	VG	E	8	—
✓ <i>WEATHERBY VARMINTMASTER DELUXE</i>	VG	VG	E	6 1/4	3
✓ <i>SAKO VIXEN B 141 F</i>	VG	VG	VG	7 3/4	5
✓ <i>BROWNING SAFARI 160703</i>	VG	VG	VG	8 1/2	4
✓ <i>TRADEWINDS 607K</i>	VG	VG	G-to-VG	6 1/2	3

ACCEPTABLE—Good

<i>REMINGTON 700 RDL #5920</i>	G-to-VG	VG	G	8 1/2	4
<i>BSA MONARCH DELUXE</i>	VG	G	G-to-VG	7 1/2	3
<i>WINCHESTER 70 VARMINT</i>	G	VG	F-to-G	9	3
<i>SAVAGE 110 C</i>	G	G	F-to-G	8 1/4	4
<i>H & R 300 ULTRA</i>	F	VG	G-to-VG	7 1/4	5
<i>REMINGTON 788 #9736</i>	G	G	F-to-G	7 1/4	3

ACCEPTABLE—Fair

<i>SAVAGE 340</i>	G	F	F	7 1/2	4
<i>WARDS WESTERN FIELD Cal. No. 714</i>	G	F	F	7	4

® Figures give capacity of magazine only; they do not include cartridge in chamber.

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The slender, tapered barrel of the Weatherby is in considerable contrast to the extra-cost heavyweight varmint barrel of the Remington 700. A heavier barrel may sometimes help you hold a rifle steadier, but the standard barrels were as accurate when fired from a rest

RATINGS OF VARMINT RIFLES

Listed in order of estimated overall quality based on field tests and engineering judgments. Closely ranked models within groups differed little in overall quality. All models provide for mounting a telescopic sight. Except as noted, each has a bolt-action repeating mechanism, trigger-pull adjustment, hinged floor plate, 24-in. barrel of standard weight, sling attachments, single trigger with no appreciable creep and a stock with raised cheekpiece and checkering judged of adequate sharpness to provide a good grip. Unless otherwise indicated, each was tested in .22-250 caliber and was judged capable of MOA accuracy, that is, of placing 5-shot groups within a 1-in. circle at 100 yd. Except as noted, none has sights. Prices are list; discounts may be available on some models.

ACCEPTABLE—Very Good

9 Except for finish and workmanship the following five models were judged approximately equal in overall quality (see table on facing page).

✓ **RUGER NUMBER ONE 124M** (Sears, Roebuck & Co., Inc., Southport, Conn.), \$280. Dropping-block, lever-action, single-shot. Barrel length, 26 in. No raised cheekpiece. According to the manufacturer, model available with 22-in. barrel, medium-weight or lightweight, at same price (not tested), and in .222 caliber (not tested), at same price.

✓ **WEATHERBY VARMINTMASTER DELUXE** (Weatherby, Inc., South Gate, Calif.), \$295.

✓ **SAKO VIXEN 8 141 F** (Firesarms International Corp., Washington, D.C.), \$206. .222 caliber. Tested with heavyweight barrel; similar model with standard barrel available at \$192.35 (not tested).

✓ **BROWNING SAFARI 160709** (Browning Arms Co., Morgan, Utah), \$207.50. Also available in .222 caliber (not tested).

✓ **TRADEWINDS 607X** (Tradewinds, Inc., Tacoma, Wash.), \$169.50. Barrel length, 23½ in. Fired with MOA accuracy with hand-loaded ammunition, but not with commercial ammunition. Removable box magazine. Only model tested with double set trigger, judged an aid to accuracy (see story). Also available in .222 caliber (not tested).

ACCEPTABLE—Good

REMINGTON 700 L01 #5926 (Remington Arms Co., Inc., Bridgeport, Conn.), \$169.95. Tested with heavyweight barrel; similar model with standard barrel available at \$154.95 (not tested). Under certain circumstances, it was possible to fire our sample accidentally when releasing the safety (see story).

ISA HARRISON DELUXE (J. L. Galoi & Son, Inc., NYC), \$149.95. .222

caliber. Barrel length, 22 in. Slight trigger creep. Has iron sights.

WINCHESTER 70 VARMINT (Winchester-Western, New Haven, Conn.), \$149.95. Tested in .225 caliber because not available in .222 or .22-250 in rest for testing. According to the manufacturer, model now available in .22-250. Tested with heavyweight barrel; similar model with standard barrel available at \$149.95 (not tested). Checkering judged of inadequate sharpness for good grip.

SAVAGE 110 C (Savage Arms Div., Enhart Corp., Westfield, Mass.), \$124.50. Removable box magazine. Slight trigger creep. No sling attachments or raised cheekpiece. Checkering judged of inadequate sharpness for good grip.

H&R 300 ULTRA (Harrington & Richardson, Inc., Worcester, Mass.), \$205. Fired with slightly less than MOA accuracy. Barrel length, 22 in. Has iron sights.

REMINGTON 700, #9736 (Remington Arms Co., Inc.), \$84.95. Removable box magazine. No trigger-pull adjustment. Sling attachments, checkering or raised cheekpiece. Has iron sights.

ACCEPTABLE—Fair

9 The following two models were considerably less accurate than those preceding.

SAVAGE 340 (Savage Arms Div., Enhart Corp.), \$73.50. .222 caliber. Removable box magazine. Slight trigger creep. No trigger-pull adjustment, sling attachments, or raised cheekpiece. Has iron sights. Checkering judged of inadequate sharpness for good grip. Some times jammed when loaded singly.

WAVERLY WESTERN FIELD (No. 714 (Montgomery Ward), \$59.95 plus shipping. Appears similar to Savage 340, procedure. Made of softer wood. All other comments apply.

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