

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 specs 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

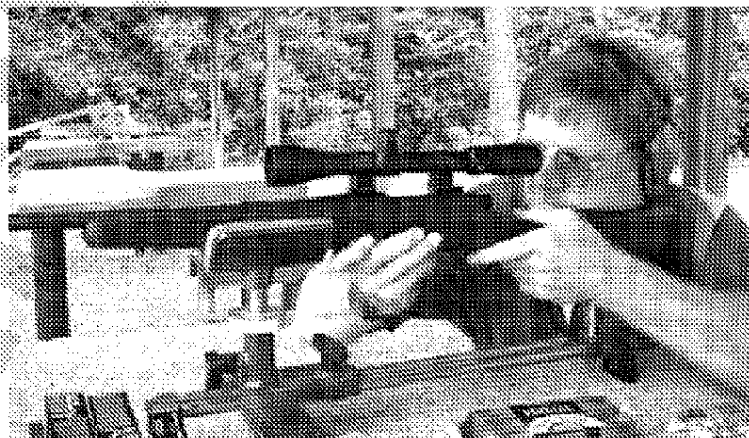
barrel lengths and a range of pricing. The Ruger was a .243 M77FRBBZ MKII, \$800 MSRP.

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 ammos 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 boat-tail 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.

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achieve the surprisingly good accuracy numbers. Break-in for the guns consisted of firing the Remington 80-grain rounds in this sequence: shoot one, then brush/swab/patch; shoot two, brush/swab/patch; shoot three, brush/swab/patch; shoot four brush/swab/patch, then cool down.

Our test shooter, a high-power competitor, used a one-piece Model 500 rifle rest available from <target-shooting.com>, \$250, atop a concrete bench. He also wore a Past Mag Recoil Shield, \$30, even though the recoil from these guns was light. We shot three-shot groups at 100 yards on EZ2C No. 6 targets (<ez2ctargets.com>), \$7.50 per pad of 40 targets.

The test scope affixed to all three guns was a proven older Springfield ART IV 3x9x40, and our shooter shot all the groups on the 3X setting. We used Weaver mounts we purchased from Gander Mountain on the Remington and Browning guns, and we used the supplied Ruger mounts with the Frontier.

Bottom Line: As you can see from the accuracy results nearby, we can confidently recommend you go out and buy any of these rifles. These guns simply shot amazingly well. But we also formed opinions about each gun that may make one more suitable for certain shooters than others:

Ruger M77 Frontier Rifle .243 M77FRBBZ MKII, No. 17882, \$800

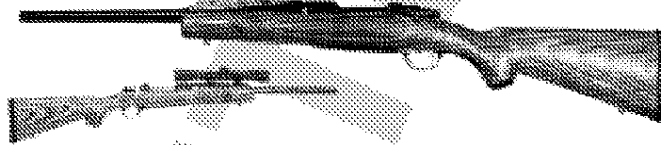
In addition to the laminated stock and 16.5-inch-long barrel mentioned above, the Ruger M77 Mark II Frontier Rifle came with sling swivel adapters, Ruger scope rings, and a Weaver-style scope base adapter. All of the chamberings for the line are in short-action cartridges: 7mm-08 Rem., .243 Win., .308 Win., and .300 WSM. We shot the .243 in this test.

Our test gun's bolt was stainless steel with a 90-degree bolt lift. The receiver was a heat-treated blued-steel alloy, as was the barrel. The gun's capacity was 4+1, and it didn't come with open sights. The grey laminate stock had a short length of

RUGER M77 FRONTIER RIFLE .243 M77FRBBZ MKII, NO. 17882, \$800

● GUN TESTS RECOMMENDS: GUN PICK ●

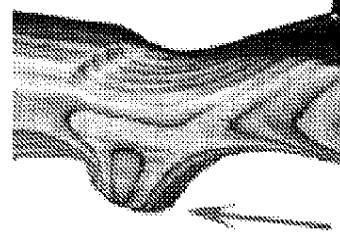
This short, handy rifle would be at home in a scabbard, in the rack of a ranch truck, or on the back of a high-country hunter. We found very few nits to pick on it.



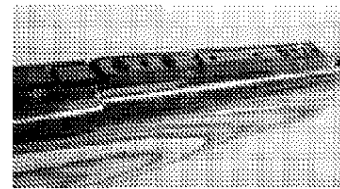
SPECIFICATIONS

OVERALL LENGTH.....	35.5 IN	CAPACITY.....	4+1 ROUNDS
BARREL LENGTH.....	16.5 IN	ACTION MATERIAL.....	3-JUED STEEL RECV/SS BOLT
SIGHT RADIUS.....	NA	ACTION TYPE.....	BOLT
OVERALL HEIGHT (w/SCOPE).....	7.8 IN	BARREL.....	BLUED STEEL/6 GROOVE, 1:10 RH
LENGTH OF PULL.....	12.6 IN	MAGAZINE TYPE.....	HINGED BOX
DROP @ COVR.....	0.6 IN	STOCK.....	LAMINATED HARDWOOD
DROP @ HEEL.....	0.6 IN	TRIGGER FULL WEIGHT.....	6.0 LBS.
DROP @ TOE.....	5.3 IN	WARRANTY.....	NONE WRITTEN
PITCH (DOWN).....	1.4 IN	TELEPHONE.....	(203) 259-7646
WEIGHT (UNLOADED).....	6.75 LBS	WEBSITE OR EMAIL.....	WWW.RUGER.COM

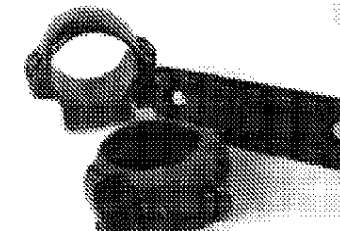
The grey laminate stock was good looking, and probably more stable than the Browning's wood stock. The pistol grip was noticeably shallower than the others, which gave the trigger hand the odd sensation of falling off the grip.



Here's the heart of the Frontier design. The quarter rib allows a forward scope mount, which improves access to the top of the action and keeps the ocular bell of the scope off the shooter's eyebrow. However, recoil was so light in the .243 that we wouldn't be worried about getting cut.



One of the things Ruger continues to do well is supply plenty of tight-fitting mounting hardware. In this case, the supplied rings, which fit directly on the receiver or quarter rib, and a Weaver rail give the shooter plenty of flexibility in terms of what optics he might want to use.



pull of 12.6 inches, and a drop at the comb of 0.6 inch. Overall, the gun measured 35.5 inches in length and weighed (unloaded) 6.75 pounds. On the barrel was a quarter-rib mount machined to accept Ruger rings and an included Weaver-style rail. The safety is a three-position wing type located at the rear of the bolt.

The Frontier Rifle's bolt has a two-lug lockup, a claw extractor, controlled round feeding from the magazine, and a fixed-blade ejector. The forearm on the stock has also been shortened. The barreled action, pistol grip cap, sling swivel studs, and hinged magazine floorplate are blued steel. The bolt, extractor, and trigger are stainless steel. The buttplate is a black synthetic rubber. Mounted on the barrel just forward of the action is a quarter rib, which is machined to accept Ruger's scope rings. It is also drilled and tapped to accept a Picatinny-rail scope base.

The ability to forward-mount a scope with intermediate eye relief is what separates the Ruger from its competitors. Some of the purported advantages are, in our opinion, a load of hooey. Does moving the scope forward allow greater peripheral vision? We don't think so. The off eye supplies most, or all, of the peripheral vision whether the scope is back or forward. With the scope out front, Ruger says leaving both eyes open makes tracking a moving target much easier than trying to do so through a conventional high-powered scope. To what end? Focus on the target still has to funnel through the scope, and in our testing it was easier to lose a target in the scope when focus changed from the right to the left eye and back again.

To its credit, the system does allow easier access to the action for loading, and more clearance between the shooter's eyebrow and the scope in heavily recoiling rifles.

The trigger pull on our gun measured a crisp but heavy 6-pound average, with break weights ranging between 5.75 and 6.4 pounds. The balance point on the rifle (without scope) is about a half inch from the

ACCURACY AND CHRONOGRAPH DATA			
Federal Premium 85-gr. Sierra BTHPs No. P243D	Remington M700 SPS Youth	Browning A-Bolt II	Ruger Frontier
Average Velocity	3240 fps	3261 fps	3014 fps
Standard Deviation	16 fps	18 fps	96 fps
Muzzle Energy	1981 ft.-lbs.	2007 ft.-lbs.	1715 ft.-lbs.
Smallest Group Size	0.41 in.	0.50 in.	0.45 in.
Largest Group Size	0.63 in.	0.61 in.	0.74 in.
Average Group Size	0.52 in.	0.54 in.	0.58 in.
Winchester Supreme 95-gr. Ballistic Silvertips No. S85T243A	Remington M700 SPS Youth	Browning A-Bolt II	Ruger Frontier
Average Velocity	2817 fps	2876 fps	2731 fps
Standard Deviation	15 fps	15 fps	24 fps
Muzzle Energy	1674 ft.-lbs.	1745 ft.-lbs.	1573 ft.-lbs.
Smallest Group Size	0.54 in.	0.34 in.	0.41 in.
Largest Group Size	0.81 in.	0.56 in.	0.71 in.
Average Group Size	0.68 in.	0.43 in.	0.56 in.
Remington Express 100-gr. PSPs, No. R243W3	Remington M700 SPS Youth	Browning A-Bolt II	Ruger Frontier
Average Velocity	2825 fps	2894 fps	2716 fps
Standard Deviation	14 fps	25fps	9 fps
Muzzle Energy	1772 ft.-lbs.	1860 ft.-lbs.	1638 ft.-lbs.
Smallest Group Size	0.71 in.	0.28 in.	0.28 in.
Largest Group Size	1.01 in.	0.74 in.	0.49 in.
Average Group Size	0.87 in.	0.57 in.	0.35 in.
<i>To collect accuracy data, we fired three-shot groups from a rest at 100 yards. To capture velocity data, we used a PACT 2 chronograph with the first screen 10 feet from the muzzle.</i>			

front of the action. The short length of pull allows the shooter to bring the gun up quickly, but when the shooter works the bolt, the more-forward head position comes awfully close to the safety.

As we noted, we thought the short barrel might put the Frontier at either a velocity or accuracy disadvantage. In terms of accuracy, our worries were unfounded. All three guns averaged great groups with the Federal 85-grain bullets (Remington, 0.52 inch; Browning, 0.54 inch; Ruger 0.58 inch), and Ruger shot similar groups with the Winchester 95-grain rounds (0.56 inch), and even better groups with the Remington Core-Lokts, a best-of-test 0.35 inch.

On the velocity side, the Frontier

did turn in the lowest fps readings: 3014 fps with the Federal ammo (more than 200 fps lower than the other guns); 2731 fps with the Winchester (up to 150 fps slower than the Browning); and 180 fps slower (2716 fps) than the Browning with the 100-grain Remingtons. In the field, however, with a 250-yard point-blank zero, those numbers might ask for another inch of elevation change for the Ruger at 300 yards.

In operation, case feeding and extraction was slick and easy. Fit and finish on the gun were excellent.

**Browning A-Bolt
Micro Hunter No. 035020211,
243 Win., \$684**

The major visual differences be-

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tween the Micro and the Frontier are the longer barrel (20 inches, free floated and glass bedded at the recoil lug and rear of receiver) and the satin-finished walnut stock.

The Browning's bolt has a 60-degree throw, and its bolt utilizes a non-rotating bolt sleeve that runs the entire length of the bolt. When unlocked, three guide ribs on the bolt sleeve align with the three locking lugs to allow the bolt to slide smoothly. The A-Bolt fed very smoothly, in our view.

The chrome-plated trigger sear offered a crisp trigger pull that's screw adjustable. Our trigger broke at a range of weights from a low of 3.5 pounds to 4.75 pounds, for an average of 3.75 pounds, slightly lower than the factory's claimed 4 pounds. The safety was a top-tang, thumb-operated unit, which we easily actuated with the thumb of the shooting hand. The hinged floorplate with detachable box magazine makes it simple and fast to load a spare magazine. The gun holds three in magazine, one in chamber. The receiver was drilled and tapped for the installation of scope mounts, and the forearm included Michaels post-type swivel studs, but no swivels.

The stock's LOP was a near-standard 13.3 inches, with a drop at the comb of 0.6 inch. Overall, the gun measured 41.5 inches in length and weighed 6.25 pounds unloaded.

The Micro doesn't seem long when laid alongside the Frontier, and it's lighter and had better overall ballistic performance, recording the highest velocities across the board. On the accuracy side, we would call the Browning a half-inch gun.

Remington 700 SPS Youth .243 Win. No. 27475, \$520

This was unquestionably the least expensive gun in the test, especially when real dollars were considered. At Carter's Country in Houston, a major retailer, we found both the Micro Hunter and SPS Youth in stock, for \$650 and \$400 respectively. We would have to have ordered the Ruger Frontier, and it would have

BROWNING A-BOLT II MICRO HUNTER .243 WIN NO. 035020211, \$684

● GUN TESTS RECOMMENDS: BUY IT ●

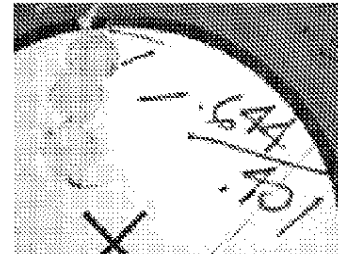
The second of three winners in this test. It showed consistent accuracy with all test ammos, looked good, felt slim, and handled fast. What's not to like?



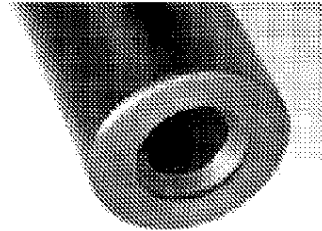
SPECIFICATIONS

OVERALL LENGTH	41.5 IN.	CAPACITY	3+ ROUNDS
BARREL LENGTH	20 IN.	ACTION MATERIAL	BLUED STEEL
SIGHT RADIUS	NA	ACTION TYPE	BOLT
OVERALL HEIGHT (w/SCOPE)	18.3 IN.	BARREL	BLUED STEEL/11 CRH
LENGTH OF PULL	13.3 IN.	MAGAZINE TYPE	HINGED DETACHABLE 3+X
D-OF @ COVR.	0.6 IN.	STOCK	SATIN FINISH WALNUT
D-OF @ HFT	0.5 IN.	TRIGGER PULL WEIGHT	3.75 RS.
D-OF @ TJE	0.3 IN.	WARRANTY	NONE WRITTEN
PITCH (DOWN)	0.7 IN.	TELEPHONE	(801) 876-2711
WEIGHT (UNLOADED)	6.25 LBS.	WEBSITE OR EMAIL	WWW.BROWNING.COM

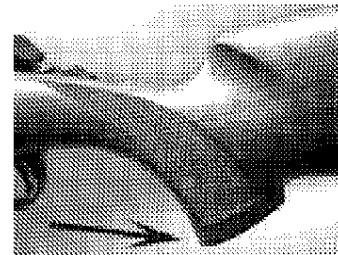
Here's the kind of accuracy we were getting out of the Micro Hunter. This three-shot group measured 0.644 inch outside edge to outside edge, and only 0.401 center to center with the inexpensive 80-grain break-in ammo from Remington.



One of the niceties on the Browning was the recessed muzzle crown. That will likely keep the rifling from getting dinged. Another plus was the gun's adjustable trigger. It obviously worked fine out of the box, but if we owned the gun, we might dial it down to 3.5 pounds.



There are subtle differences in the way these guns handled, but one noticeable one was the radius on the Browning's grip. It had a more downward turn (arrow) than the Ruger, and offered a better grip surface because of that angle and the wood checkering.



REMINGTON 700 SPS YOUTH .243 WIN. NO. 27475, \$520

● GUN TESTS RECOMMENDS: BEST BUY ●

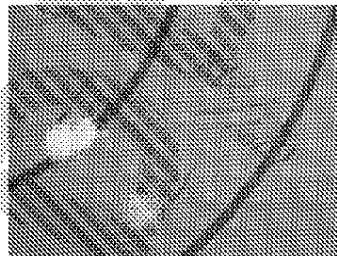
It's difficult to fault this gun in any way: It would be a durable, hard-living addition to any hunting camp, would be resistant to the elements, and would be easy to carry, all at a great price.



SPECIFICATIONS

OVERALL LENGTH	38.6 in.	CAPACITY	4+1 rounds
BARREL LENGTH	23 in.	ACTION MATERIAL	Blued Matte Steel
SIGHT RADIUS	NA	ACTION TYPE	Bolt
OVERALL HEIGHT (w/SCOPE)	3.4 in.	BARREL	Blued Matte Steel 1:8 RH
LENGTH OF PULL	12.4 in.	MAGAZINE TYPE	Hinged Floorplate Box
DROP @ COMB	1.125 in.	STOCK	Black Synthetic
DROP @ HPR	1.375 in.	TRIGGER PULL WEIGHT	4.3 lbs.
DROP @ TCE	3.4 in.	WARRANTY	Two-Year Limited
PITCH (DOWN)	0.75 in.	TELEPHONE	(800) 243-9700
WEIGHT UNLOADED	6.75 lbs.	WEBSITE EMAIL	WWW.REMINGTON.COM

Here's a representative sampling of how the SPS Youth shot. The outside edges are 0.872 inch apart, and center to center, the group measures only 0.629 inch. This puts this bargain-price gun on par with some of the best tactical rifles we've tested.



cost \$617, all without sales taxes. Thus SPS was \$250 cheaper than the Browning and \$217 cheaper than the Ruger.

The stock's LOP was 12.4 inches, with a drop at the comb of 1.12 inches. This allowed shooters with fuller faces to see into the scope a little more easily than on the Micro. Overall, the gun measured 38.6 inches in length and weighed 6.75 pounds unloaded.

Oddly, the Youth version gun was a better overall matchup to the Ruger than anything else in the Remington line we could find. Its dimensions are an inch shorter in the butt than a regular M700 (12.4 inches LOP) and it weighs 6.75 pounds, the same as the Ruger. But it has a 20-inch

barrel. In fact, it looked like a prop from the movie, "Honey, I shrunk the tactical gun."

It also shot like a tactical gun with Federal's 85-grain bullets, with 0.52-inch groups, slightly better than the Browning and Ruger. It apparently didn't like the heavier bullets as well, but bottom line, it shot everything we fed it into sub-1-inch groups. We'll have to check the archives, but we couldn't recall having three guns shoot all sub-MOA in any test, including vastly more expensive tactical rifles.

Each Model 700 SPS is fit with a newly designed, more ergonomic synthetic stock featuring the R3 recoil pad. This very soft pad put the other two guns to shame, and it

made a huge difference in shooter comfort. The carbon-steel barrel was matte-blued and drilled and tapped for scope mounts, which in our test were a Weaver 18500 Matte 35M top-mount base in front and a 4850F 36M rear base. Bases and rings added about \$30 to the gun's cost. The carbon-steel barrel came without sights, and the receiver was drilled and tapped for scope mounts. All exterior metalwork featured a matte blued finish. The gun had a hinged floor plate magazine and swivel studs.

The gun's barrel wasn't free floated like the Browning's, and of course its cosmetics weren't up to the level of the other guns.

The trigger sear broke at a range of weights from a low of 4.25 pounds to 4.5 pounds, with an average of 4.3 pounds. The safety was a top-right-tang, thumb-operated push-lever, which we could reach with the thumb of the shooting hand, though it forced our grip on the gun to change somewhat.

Gun Tests Recommends

☆☆☆ **Ruger M77 Frontier Rifle .243 M77FRBBZ MKII, No. 17882, \$800. Our Pick.** If money were no object, we would not hesitate to buy this fast-handling, accurate rifle. We liked some aspects of its forward-mount concept enough to pick it over the Micro.

☆☆☆ **Browning A-Bolt Micro Hunter .243 Win. No. 035020211, \$684. Buy It.** Slightly more expensive than the Frontier, this is still an excellent shooter. If traditional cosmetics are important to you, then choose it ahead of the Frontier.

☆☆☆☆ **Remington 700 SPS Youth .243 Win. No. 27475, \$520. Best Buy.** The literal dark horse in this test, the SPS Youth doesn't dwarf the Frontier. It outshot each of the other guns with one ammunition. We now see why our sheep-hunting friend liked his so much: Despite its name, the SPS Youth is a great-shooting gun that's easy to carry. We think it's a bargain for nearly any shooter, youth or adult. **GT**