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- Empire Rifles 9.3x62

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The Weatherby Varmint Special features a 22-inch barrel and
Leupold VX-II 4-14x scope. Rifle photo by Stan Trzoniec. Coyote
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102 Downsizing Rifles & Woodsmoke - John Barsness
Thirty years ago a 3-9x scope was considered plenty for big game hunting or most varmint hunting, but today hunters are putting even higher powered scopes on their rifles. The reason most often quoted: “If you can’t see it, you can’t hit it.” Many shooters also believe that 12x to 20x allows them to place shots more precisely.

The first statement is obvious, but the notion that super-high magnification helps you hit a big game animal’s heart and lungs more precisely under field conditions is debatable. I have done this far too often – and consistently – with low-power scopes to believe it. Being able to see precisely which hair to aim adds nothing to our ability to hold, or judge the wind, and even the most accurate rifle will not normally group into one hair at 300 yards. A variable does, however, allow us to discern one animal from another at longer ranges, whether meat or trophy hunting.

Over the past few months I’ve been field-testing a pair of hunting-shooting-fishing glasses from a new company named Beloptix and am most impressed. These are wrap-around glasses, the company’s Trophy model frame with photochromic lenses that change from dark to light depending on conditions. I’ve tried such lenses before, but none change in the wide range that the Beloptix lenses do, or as quickly.

In addition, the Trophy frame has side shields, important both to reduce glare and to prevent anything from sneaking into your eyes from the side, whether wind-blown trout flies, vagrant bird shot or perhaps tiny bits of brass from a blown case.

If need be, Beloptix will build these glasses to your prescription. In my case this means a lot of correction for near-sightedness, plus a progressive reading correction. My Trophies have worked flawlessly and are by far the best hunting-shooting-fishing glasses I’ve ever owned. They are not cheap, but then good stuff never is.

For more information call toll-free: 1-877-235-6789; or visit online: www.beloptix.com.
leave the scope on no more than 6x, even on relatively long shots. At lower magnifications you can usually spot your own misses, due to the greater field of view. Even with some relatively hard-kicking rounds, at longer ranges you’ll normally see where the bullet lands, because by the time the bullet arrives, the rifle has settled down after recoil. With lighter rounds its even easier.

If you indeed missed (and this has been known to happen), you’ll be able to tell where to hold for the next shot - without the extra time required for your guide to describe the miss. He may not give you precise information anyway. I know this because it’s happened to me. Too often the guide (or your hunting pal) is standing to one side, often higher than you are. This makes seeing exactly where a bullet hit problematic.

The last time this happened I was lying prone, attempting to shoot a very large-antlered bull caribou about 400 yards away, with my guide standing several feet to my left. I knew the trajectory of the .30-06 precisely, so placing the crosshair vertically was no problem. However, there was also a good wind blowing from the left. I compensated, but through the 6x scope could see the bullet splash in the wet muskeg, just in front of the bull’s chest. My guide said, “Low.”

If I hadn’t seen the splash, I would have had to believe him. Instead I merely held another foot into the wind - and the bullet landed in the bull’s heart. Lucky? Somewhat, but I would have had to be luckier yet if I’d believed the guide.

John’s book Optics for the Hunter can be ordered by mailing a check for $23.50 (the price includes postage) to Deep Creek Press, PO Box 579, Townsend MT 59644-0579; or order by credit card at: www.riflesandrecipes.com.
As a successful corporate lawyer on Wall Street who was approaching middle age, George stepped back to take a look at what he really wanted to do. Being an ardent hunter, one with a passion for fine rifles and with a couple of children he didn’t want to bring up in the concrete jungle of New York City, George made a drastic lifestyle change and moved to the backwoods of New Hampshire.

With a dream and an entrepreneurial spirit George set out to make the most reliable, accurate hunting rifle on the market. He wasn’t trying to reinvent the wheel, as some manufacturers do; he just wanted to come up with a rifle that would give a lifetime of reliable service, look good and give the hunter a great pride in ownership. After looking at most all rifles on the market, past or present, talking to many of
the custom rifle makers and to professional hunters whose lives sometimes depend on the reliability of their rifles, he could come up with no better action on which to base his rifle than the 98 Mauser design. This action was developed before the turn of the twentieth century for the German military. It has stood the test of time because of its performance and dependability.

With modern material and machinery the new Model 98 action is machined from a solid block of steel with tolerances unheard of in the past. The same is true with the bolt; nothing is glued on that could come apart at an inopportune time. It’s all one piece.

The large nonrotating extractor, which the Mauser is noted for, ensures that each round is under control from the time it is stripped from the magazine and fed into the chamber. Upon extraction the 19-degree undercut bolt head and dovetailed forward edge of the extractor work in unison to lock the cartridge against the bolt face to help ensure the extractor does not jump the cartridge rim during extraction. Over 90 degrees of the cartridge’s rim is engaged by the extractor from the time it is stripped from the magazine until it clears the ejection port. A cam at the back of the rear receiver ring, which is engaged by the bolt handle, also aids in pulling the case from the chamber. Another big advantage of the 98 is the fact it can be field stripped down to the smallest component without the use of tools.

With numerous trips between New Hampshire and Texas, George and master gunsmith and barrel maker Bill Wiseman spent long hours in developing what is now Empire Rifles. With both men the main priorities for this new rifle were quality and reliability. Bill’s barrels are noted for their accuracy, enough so that most all major ammunition manufacturers use his test barrels in the development of their products.

The Empire rifle is not a production product that is run down an assembly line. Each rifle is made to the individual specifications of the purchaser. It’s about as close to a custom rifle as you can get. Offered in over 50 different calibers from .257 Roberts to the monster .500 Jeffery, Empire has a rifle chambered for most any hunting application.

Empire lists a variety of options, including synthetic stocks.

The customer has the choice of stainless steel or chrome-moly and right or left hand.
With the newly manufactured Double Square Bridge 98 action as the heart of the rifle there are three different models to choose from, including the Standard, Legacy and the new short-action, lightweight Liberty. The customer also has the choice of stainless steel or chrome-moly and right or left hand. There are four different grades for each model, but each shares the same components and features.

Each rifle is fitted with a match grade barrel, cut to whatever length the customer specifies, and it's guaranteed to shoot sub-MOA accuracy with hunting ammunition. The trigger is tuned and weight of pull is set to the customer's specifications. Length of pull is also to the customer's specs, with a Pachmayr SG100 Decelerator pad installed. A ceramic weatherproof finish (indistinguishable from matte blue) is provided on all metal parts, along with a straddle floorplate with release inside the bow. Also included are one inch or 30mm custom scope rings.

The customer's scope is mounted, sighted in and the accuracy proof target with load data is shipped with the rifle. Needless to say the accuracy, fit and finish are covered by a limited lifetime warranty.

The standard Field Grade is a pure working rifle. Near indestructible, it is fitted with a pillar-bedded Kevlar stock. When combined with the new ceramic metal finish, it makes the rifle impervious to anything Mother Nature has to offer.

The Guide Grade differs only with an English XX grade walnut stock. Each has an ebony grip cap and is hand-checkered 22 lines per inch (LPI) with a hand-rubbed oil finish. This is a rifle that blends classic looks with the reliability of the 98 action.

Professional Grade gets a little

Receiver and floorplate exhibit precision workmanship.
The Empire Express Grade 9.3x62 produced fine accuracy.

Professional Grade gets a little fancier with a Turkish XXX walnut stock.

or grade covers almost anything you can think of. A butter knife bolt handle, skeleton grip cap, integral quarter-rib, fluted barrel, dropped box magazine and a palm swell on the stock are just a few of the options that can be incorporated in an Empire rifle.

Two years ago I had the opportunity to test, play with and hunt with the then-new Empire rifle. When asked what model and caliber, I said a plain jane working rifle in .300 WSM. There were two reasons for requesting this model rifle. One, the .300 WSM is a great cartridge for most anything on the North American continent except for big bears, but like any short, fat cartridge, there is a potential feeding problem when stripped from a staggered magazine. I wanted to see how Empire solved this problem.

The second reason was a planned trip to northern British Columbia where weather, tricky mountain terrain and saddle time would be the norm. Getting older, slower and not as nimble as 20 years ago, I didn’t want to have the additional worry about dingings or scratching someone else’s rifle.

When the rifle was received, there were a couple of welcome surprises that had not been anticipated. With all the new short magnums, the rifle comes with two, four-round detachable box magazines. Bill has designed the magazine so the rounds are stacked in a staggered position to reduce the depth of the magazine, yet the feeding of the top round is positioned in line with the chamber. This way the round is fed straight into the chamber as the bolt is moved into battery.

The Express Grade is top of the line and is destined to become an heirloom. The Turkish XXX grade walnut stock has a cross bolt, ebony forend tip and grip cap (steel grip cap optional). A barrel band and embedded sling swivel stud goes along with the 24 LPI, three-panel checkering pattern. Also included with the Express Grade is silver beaded or banded front sight and single blade rear. Quick detachable one inch or 30mm rings are also included.

The list of additional options that can be added to each model
or ammunition. A couple of different factory loads and some handloads with different bullet weights were right at .5 inch. Very few rifles will give this type of performance right out of the box.

When you get your hands on a rifle like this, you don't let it get away. Needless to say when the season was over, a check was sent to New Hampshire, and the rifle resides in a prominent space in my gun rack.

Besides a heavy barreled .308 Winchester target rifle, the Empire .300 WSM is the rifle used when testing .30-caliber bullets. When shooting newly introduced bullets, accuracy is one of the most important criteria. These are the only two .30-caliber rifles I have that will reliably wring the best out of bullets being tested.

On a recent trip to Africa, I had the opportunity to use a different Empire rifle, other than my blue collar .300 WSM. The year 2005 was the 100th anniversary of the 9.3x62 Mauser, which was developed by Paul Mauser specifically to meet the needs of farmers and ranchers in Africa for meat hunting and predator control. They needed an inexpensive rifle that could be used for normal shooting yet powerful enough to stop the big boys. All that was needed was to rebarrel the plentiful 98 model military rifles; no other alterations were required.

On this trip it was decided all the hunters would use 9.3s for the plains game hunt in Namibia. The rifle borrowed from Empire was a fancy Express Grade Standard model that shot and performed as good as it looked. When the hunt was over and everyone had returned home, I procrastinated for a few days before it was returned. There were no open slots in the gun rack and...
Above, Chub’s brother Terry took this trophy gemsbok in Namibia with the Empire Express Grade 9.3x62. Right, Chub bagged this Texas whitetail with an Empire .300 WSM.

something about house payments that stopped another check from being sent to New Hampshire.

Empire Rifle Company is here to stay. Anytime you can provide the customer with this type of quality and performance in a product, it’s hard not to be successful. It’s a rifle built by riflemen who take great pride in their efforts. After hunting with one of Empire’s rifles, it is easy to understand why it will be passed on to the next generation rather than end up on a used gun rack somewhere.

For more information contact The Empire Rifle Company, 36 Jenney Road (PO Box 406), Meriden NH 03770; or online at: www.empirerifles.com.

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One of Leupold’s latest offerings, its Wind River 6x32s, reminded me, once again, that attempting to judge the potential usefulness of a binocular by its magnification alone is just plain dumb. For one thing, the quality of modern, multicoated lenses makes a world of difference in any binocular’s performance. Certainly, the pocket-sized Japanese-made 6x’s are a far cry from the last glasses of that magnification I used, the 6x24s the army used to issue back in the 1940s and 1950s. If memory serves correctly, they were light and fairly compact, okay when the light was good but at dawn or dusk or when the sky turned gray, they weren’t too useful. The Wind River Sixes, on the other hand, give a large, bright and detailed view of the surrounding world. Colors are vivid and the field of view extremely wide. Unexpectedly, distant objects, those out there 500 yards and beyond, were easy to see and clearly defined. Granted, the days here have been painfully bright and the air clear, but even so, that level of performance from 6x glasses caught me by surprise.

The same experiment was tried with a different number plate at a distance of 157 yards. Through the 6x32, the first two of the three numbers were legible, but all three letters were too blurred to identify. Peering through the 7x30 gave exactly the same results. It took a good 8x40 to let me read all the numbers and letters at that distance.

Checking the local foothills, again with the aid of the Bushnell rangefinder, some joggers were spotted at 747 and 767 yards, respectively, through both glasses. Their images were compared with those of the 8x40. The 8x is first-class, optically, and although their images were a bit larger than those seen through the 6x32, it was just as easy to distinguish a male runner from the female one through the 6x as it was through the 7x or 8x.

Whenever I head for the local rifle range, it’s my habit to bring some field-glasses along. Targets are set up at 100 yards and 25 yards. The spotting scope is focused on the 100-yard targets; the binocular is employed to check the 25-yard targets. Since new loads don’t always go where the sights say they should, the first couple of rounds are fired at 25 yards – just to be sure. Last week, as luck would have it, I brought all the usual gear to the range – except my reading glasses. Fortunately, the 6x32 was along that day. Backing about five feet away from the scope, the binocular was focused on the windage dial, corrections made, then the 6x was aimed at the elevation dial and a couple of clicks added there. That did it. At 25 yards, the bullets began striking dead center. Out at the 100-yard line, they were a couple of inches high but centered. That close-up focusing ability of the 6x32 offered advantages I never would have considered had my memory not failed me – again.

One afternoon, the TV weather...
bookies predicted rain, and sure enough, clouds began boiling up over the local mountains and the skies grew darker and darker. Canceling my plans to head for the mountains, I settled for my wife’s garden out in back of the house. There, a couple of strangely fascinating hours were spent peeking over honeybees’ shoulders as they worked feverishly away – without having to worry about getting stung.

Later, switching my attention to the surrounding trees, from a distance of about 20 yards, I found myself with the 6x32 glued to my eyes, sharing the shadows with a number of constantly bickering songbirds – again, without alerting them to my distant curiosity. Although vaguely conscious of their near-constant chirping in the background, I never realized that songbirds were so aggressive or had such nasty dispositions. They shoved one another, pecked each other, squabbled over the best place on a branch – there seemed to be no end to their dissatisfaction with one another. Never saw anything like it. Wonder if professional jealousy plays a role in these seemingly endless disputes? Well, no matter, the point is that the feathery 6x32 introduced me to a whole secret world right in my own backyard, a world I never even suspected existed.

Were I a bow hunter searching for a new binocular, I’d certainly give the little Leupolds a long, hard look. Light, compact enough to hang almost unnoticed from a belt (can’t have anything on the chest obstructing the bowstring) and powerful enough to spot anything I’d need to see within the range I’d want or expect to see it, that 6x32 should certainly fit the bill.

Same for the black-powder fan. Small enough to slip into a jacket pocket; boasting an exit pupil as large as most men can handle at dawn or dusk; first-class light-gathering ability; easy, one-handed

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isn’t the sole property of high-magnification binoculars. Look them all over while you’re shopping – and be sure to glance through one of Leupold’s 6x32s. You may be as surprised, and impressed, as I have been. – Al Miller

Waterfowlers might be interested too. The Leupolds are completely waterproof. Then too, considering the clothes and the other bulky gear the average duck and goose hunter packs around, any binocular he carries should be compact and light. The Wind River 6x32 certainly meets that criteria.

Of course, every optical instrument has a few characteristics of its own, which a user has to identify and accommodate. The Leupolds were no exception. Learning to control the focusing knob took some time and effort. Fortunately, the rubber- armored knob is 1.25 inches in diameter and .65 inch thick, large enough to be controlled easily by either or both index fingers while holding the binocular to the eyes. Ordinarily, only a brief nudge of the focus knob is all that’s needed to bring a target into sharp focus – when any adjustment is needed at all. Part of the reason is, of course, that the lower the magnification, the greater the depth of field. It took me some time to re-learn that, but to be truthful, those glasses taught me quite a few things.

For one, 6x glasses are a lot less tiring to use during prolonged scanning sessions than the more popular 8x or 10x. For another, modern, multicoated lenses make the current breed of binoculars so superior to those produced even as recently as 10 years ago that there’s really no basis for comparison. Lastly, light and compact have it all over big and heavy – even if the latter are more powerful.

If you’re in the market for new fieldglasses, don’t let your search be limited by magnification. In the long run, quality offers more satisfaction than power, and bright, clear, detailed imagery
Last year I was hunting prairie dogs with a party that included Mickey Fowler. An outdoor (read “gun”) writer, Mickey is also a world-class marksman with several national championships under his belt. When he collared me to talk about a new scope system he had just developed in partnership with John Pride (another much-titled competitive shooter), I gave him my full attention. I thought he had an interesting concept, and he promised to send me a sample when one became available.

A few months ago, three scopes arrived in the mail. Two were 3-9x 42mm variables, while the third was a 6x 40mm fixed-power model. All sported innovative range-compensating (not range-finding) “Rapid Reticles” specifically designed for rimfire use. Each reticle featured dual-thickness crosshairs with a series of “hold-over” lines descending from the center. These horizontal aiming guides were calibrated in multiple increments ranging from 0 to 200 yards (300 yards for the .22 magnum model).

“The .22 rimfire scopes give accurate readings for high-speed .22 Long Rifle ammo starting out at 1,200 to 1,300 feet per second, which includes Federal Lightning, CCI Blazer, Winchester Power-Point and Remington Gold Bullet hollowpoints, to name a few,” Mickey said. “The scope also works with other .22 LR loads, but some calculation will be involved. The .22 magnum scope is designed for 1,800 fps velocities generated by Winchester 40-grain .22 WMR hollowpoints and similar ammo.”

He noted the reticles were initially calibrated for zero-altitude shooting at 59 degrees Fahrenheit with a barometric pressure of 29.52. Scope height was 1.5 inches above the bore. A series of horizontal ticks along each ranging crosshair was each designed to compensate for a 10-mph crosswind coming from 3:00 or 9:00.

Unlike other range-compensating scopes I’ve used, Rapid Reticle crosshairs are clearly marked to indicate each different yardage. The reticles were designed and calibrated during actual range testing, with the results verified by Sierra’s Infinity Ballistics Computer Program.

The variable-power Pride Fowler scope reticles are mounted in the first optical plane. This means the readings hold true throughout the full range of magnification. It costs less to build scopes with reticles positioned in the second plane, but settings would remain accurate only at a certain magnification.

While these reticles appear cluttered at first, it doesn’t take long to get used to all those numbers and the fine, horizontal crosshairs. The graduations are small enough to be unobtrusive but large enough to make distant shots with surprising precision. Effective use of these scopes requires ranging the target first.
with a laser rangefinder. Alternatively, you can watch for the dust of a bullet strike, then adjust your aim to compensate - this works for both windage and elevation changes.

Each scope wears a one-inch 6061 T6 aluminum one-piece tube with a matte-black finish. Lenses are multicoated and deliver a clear, sharp sighting picture. I like the fast-focus rear eyepiece that makes adjusting the scope to your eye quick and easy. Windage and elevation adjustments are made with ¼ minute-of-angle (MOA) clicks.

Both standard and magnum 3-9x variables are 11 inches long and weigh 13 ounces. Each is priced at $289. The fixed-power 6x 40mm scope weighs the same but measures 12½ inches in length. MSRP is $189. All three are waterproof (I dunked them in the tub an hour to test this) and advertised as shockproof (I’ve never learned how to gauge a riflescope’s “shockproof” capabilities without testing it to destruction).

I’ve done a fair amount of plinking with both 3-9x variables, and they passed with flying colors. I could accurately place shots at any distance to the reticle’s outer

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The new Stevens Model 200 carries the spirit of fine workmanship and honest value. From the first rifle, Stevens has staked their reputation on a standard of quality that never varies. Each rifle is designed to meet the requirements of hunters and sportsmen who insist upon the best value available. Featuring a dual pillar bedded, gray synthetic stock, with button rifled free-floating barrel, the Model 200 is the best value in a bolt-action rifle. Offered in a variety of calibers, in short or long action, it’s the perfect rifle at a reasonable price.
I don’t know how many different rifle slings I’ve used, but it’s been a bunch. They’ve run the gamut from full-bellied leather cobra-style slings with loops for extra cartridges to plain, unadorned black nylon straps. Let’s not forget the military-style leather slings with brass adjusting claws that were the universal standard when I began shooting many years ago. The target rifles I competed with during college ROTC matches were so equipped, and I still harbor a certain fondness for these useful, but obsolescent straps.

I don’t much care for the wide, limit, provided I ranged the targets first. The beauty of these reticles is that, once you’ve sighted in the scope, you can leave the windage and elevation knobs alone. I’m looking forward to hunting with these scopes when prairie dog season rolls around again.

For more information, contact Pride Fowler Industries, Inc., Dept. R, PO Box 4301, San Dimas CA 91773; or you can visit online at: www.rapidreticle.com.
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Handloader magazine, the technical firearms publication for serious shooters and handloaders for 40 years, has entered the Information Age. Handloader is now available on DVD. The 20-disk set starts with issue Number 1 (May 1966) to issue Number 238 (December 2005) with over 26,000 pages of detailed technical material. Each DVD contains two years of issues – including technical handloading information on wildcats and standard cartridges, plus tons of related information and esoteric background for reloading procedures and firearms.

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