Krieghoff Semprio Slide Action!

RIFLE

The Road Less Traveled:
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On the cover . . .
Mossberg’s new bolt-action Varmint Predator features an AR-15 magazine and will feed both .223 Remington and 5.56mm NATO ammunition; this one is topped off with a big Leupold variable scope. Photo by Stan Trzoniec.

What’s New in the Marketplace
Inside Product News - Clair Rees

The Dubious Quest for Cartridge Efficiency
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In August 2010, Andy Larsson purchased Skinner Sights and immediately began improving and expanding the product line. They are primarily aperture or peep designs that are fully adjustable and are offered in stainless steel, carbon (blue) steel and brass, while front sights are a square post Patridge Sourdough style. The designs, and there are many, are strong, simple, lightweight and well thought out. They are precisely machined from bar stock, making them suitable for hunting, harsh field conditions, precise target work, speed shooting and plinking.

Andy Larsson shot NRA Indoor Open Sectionals (Bullseye), winning the National Championship in 1998. He also won the Montana State Bullseye Indoor Championship for seven years. He worked as a gunsmith, building custom competition guns, and is currently an active cowboy action competitor. Obviously, Larsson is a shooter first and thus knows how sights should perform, adjust and how they should look.

I am always amazed at the number of shooters who don’t understand the value of quality aperture sights. Among those who grew up shooting rimfire rifles with factory issued open notch and semi-buckhorn sights, then graduated to scope sights, I often hear comments like: “I just never felt comfortable with and neither do I know how to aim aperture sights.” Or, “I grew up with open sights and never bothered with aperture sights.” Regardless of the reason, if riflemen are not using an aperture sight, particularly on guns designed for steel sights, they could be missing out.

Aperture advantages include consistent light around the aiming point of the front sight, which allows the shooter to duplicate the sight picture and hold, regardless of the position of the sun. By comparison, open iron notch sights will reflect the sun from whatever angle, which can change how the shooter “sees” that sight and can result in aiming point and bullet impact changes. (For the record, not all open sights are created equal, with well-designed examples still being good choices under the right conditions and with the right set of eyes.) Savvy hunters appreciate that aperture sights are suitable for those early-morning or last-of-daylight shots due to the generous amount of light around the front sight and through the aperture, especially larger-hole versions. We might say that they offer essentially 100 percent light transmission. Depending on shooting applications, the aperture size can be changed to best accommodate hunting circumstances, targets or even individual eyes. Aging or imperfect eyes that suffer from seeing fuzzy or blurred traditional rear
notch sights will also naturally center the front sight in the middle of the aperture, and groups will be tight—at least if the shooter and gun are capable.

With reasonable practice, sight acquisition and target alignment can be incredibly fast, making apertures a great choice for brush and timber hunting, dangerous game and similar applications. They don’t fog, there is no parallax, they rarely break and are lightweight. In spite of their being popular on leverguns and traditional-type firearms, they are also a great choice for bolt-action rifles.

The aperture or peep sight should be looked through (not at), with the focus being on the front sight and target. The eye will naturally center the front sight in the aperture. To the beginner, this may leave an unguided feeling, but after nailing a few targets, confidence will grow. Perhaps the place to begin is to mount an aperture on a .22 rimfire and shoot it in volume until confidence is established.

In visiting the NRA Whittington Center located in Raton, New Mexico, several years back with three of my young sons, I took the opportunity to help them develop their rifle skills. My nine-year-old took a particular liking to a Browning Model 1885 Traditional Hunter Low Wall .45 Colt that is factory fitted with a tang-mounted aperture rear sight. Using handloads, he was soon ringing steel targets at 200 and 300 yards with several perfect 10-shot strings. Naturally, he was small enough that he could not hold the rifle steadily offhand, but rather used a rest. Nonetheless, it shows how even a beginner easily learns how to align and score with aperture sights.

If there is still some doubt of just how effective aperture sights are, consider the many outstanding shooting feats performed by the U.S. military (and foreign militaries) for generations and with a variety of firearms. Aperture sights are still being used today on AR-15/M16 rifles and others. Or perhaps study the accuracy levels of today’s black powder cartridge competitors at 500 yards and beyond, and check out the groups obtained by the U.S.A. Olympic teams.

Samples of Skinner Sights were installed on two Marlin lever-action rifles, a Model 1894CB .357 Magnum and a Model 444. They are of fine quality, featuring precise machining and are of a simple, proven design. For the .444 Marlin, the standard blued steel version of the Model 1895/336 sight was chosen, with a stainless steel version of the Marlin 1894 sight being installed on the .357 Magnum. The 1895/336 sight mounts
on the two rear top-of-receiver screw holes, while the 1894 sight installs using the two middle screw holes. (Some versions, such as the Skinner Alaskan, use both the forward and rear screw holes, while the ultralight Low Pro uses a single screw hole.) The two above sights are priced at $59.

Windage adjustments are accomplished by loosening the hex screw just forward of the aperture and then drifting the sight (dovetailed into the sight base) left or right as needed and tighten. For elevation adjustments, loosen the hex screw located to the right, then turn the sight counterclockwise to elevate or clockwise to lower, then tighten the hex screw.

Another feature of the Skinner Sight is interchangeable apertures. With no aperture installed, the rear sight becomes the popular Ghost Ring with a .200-inch hole diameter. This Ghost Ring features internal threads, so aperture rings are quickly screwed in, with hole size options including .040 inch (for fine precision shooting in good light), .070 inch (medium), .096 inch (standard size), .125 inch (large) and .155 inch (x-large), with the latter two being especially good for timber or dim-light hunting. There is no single perfect aperture size, with extras being available at a minimal cost. Having multiple hole size options on hand will add to the versatility of the sight and rifle.

Skinner sights are handsome and seem to flow with the firearm. While I tend to favor plain black sights, the stainless and brass versions are distinguished looking, particularly on a blued gun. A plain black aperture (for correct sight picture) was factory installed on the stainless sight.

The standard front sight blades measure .074 inch wide, feature a serrated face and are designed to work with common 3⁄8-inch dovetails. Different heights are available to help with regulation; however, sometimes filing is the perfect way to obtain the exact or correct height. For Marlin lever-guns requiring a front sight base, Skinner offers these too. The post Sourdough Patridge-style front sight results in an excellent sight picture for a variety shooting applications, including target and hunting.

Skinner sights are available for a variety of firearms and applications. In addition to an especially trim sight for Ruger No. 1s, which has recently become available, many additional rifle sights are in the development stages that will include bolt rifles, etc. Prices for the rear sight range from $37 to $135, while front sights range from $14 to $20. For more information contact Skinner Sights at PO Box 404, St. Ignatius MT 59865; or visit online at: www.skinner sights.com.
With the onslaught of AR rifles, it was only a matter of time before more traditional sporting rifles would include some AR parts and technology. We see one of these components in the new Mossberg Varmint Predator (MVP) bolt-action rifle.

The MVP is a novel approach to a varmint rifle with an AR-15 type magazine and laminated stock. This one is outfitted with a Leupold scope with a 50mm objective lens.
For the dedicated varmint shooter who wants more bangs for the buck, the big feature of this rifle is the adaption of the classic, high-volume, AR-15 type magazine. No longer are you strapped to a magazine full (five) of .223 Remington ammunition. With the MVP, the sky is the limit in higher-capacity magazines. Based on the Mossberg 4x4 rifle, this new version was designed not only for small game hunters, but for long-range competitive shooters as well.

While some will wonder what's the big deal about a rifle that uses AR-15 magazines, there is plenty of design work behind it. For one, there is no floorplate, so the action had to be redesigned to take this new feature. That includes a new magazine guide, complete with all the trimmings to include a latch to hold the magazine in place, not to mention a redesigned stock for all to function correctly. Once the magazine is pushed into the rifle, you hear a resounding click, indicating it is in place and secure. To release it, grab the magazine with your left hand while pulling back on the release just forward and topside of the magazine. As a side note, the magazine followed into the well without hesitation, and removal was just as easy.

Since the action does not have a fully integrated box magazine, there is no follower, so the bolt has been redesigned to strip rounds in an orderly and fail safe manner. As a result, engineers reinvented the bolt, if you will. From the outside of the rifle, it looks quite normal, except for its spiral fluting that seems to be the rage these days. Pulling the bolt out of the rifle, twin-locking lugs follow suit – still okay. There is a traditional plunger-type ejector working in concert with a rugged, sliding extractor, and the bolt is swept back for convenience and topped off with a checkered knob.

Looking closer, however, we see a small part of the bolt that drops down from the bolt face when it is removed from the action. In order for everything to work as it should from this type of magazine, engineers designed a “cartridge pusher” to work in unison with the AR-15 magazine. I made up some dummy rounds, loaded 10 in the magazine and worked the bolt back and forth for 30 cycles without any balking or malfunctions. Not that you will have to worry about charging woodchucks, but it’s nice to know the rifle will work flawlessly in the field. When the magazine is empty, the bolt will not follow into the breech as this “pusher” hits the top of the magazine preventing its travel forward. To close the bolt,
either push down on the magazine follower or remove the magazine completely.

For years we all went through the dreaded hard trigger syndrome. Today, adjustable triggers seem to be the norm rather than the exception, and the MVP has a great trigger! Mossberg’s is called the Lightning Bolt-Action (LBA) Adjustable Trigger System. From the box, it broke at a crisp 2 pounds, but for those who want a little more pull, it is fully adjustable via a slot-head screw from this lower limit to around 7 pounds. The sliding safety lever is behind the bolt handle; pulling it back locks the sear but allows the operation of the bolt for unloading or single loading ammunition without dropping the magazine.

The receiver itself is proportioned to the length of the .223 Remington (5.56mm NATO), is finished in a matte blue and includes twin Weaver-type bases from the factory. There is the traditional gas relief port and the bolt release – both on the left side. A hefty recoil lug placed behind the barrel nut measures an inch wide and almost .25 inch thick. Mossberg has installed twin aluminum pillars within a polymer-bedding block.

At this point, the 24-inch button-rifled, medium bull barrel tapers from a full inch to .745 inch at the muzzle and for half the barrel; fluting is applied for both weight savings and heat dissipation. Barrel twist is quoted at one turn in 9 inches for optimum performance in .22 caliber. The barrel features a target crown.

For those who might want a shorter, handier rifle, Mossberg offers one (with a slightly different stock) with an 18½-inch barrel.

The stock is profiled from gray laminated wood, offering weather resistance, some additional weight over wood for accuracy and a matte finish on the action, which easily blends in. From the muzzle end, a more generous forearm measures over 2 inches along its entire width. Where this part of the stock meets the barrel, additional finger grooves are relieved into the wood while at the same time offering clearance for air to move around the barrel for cooling. The barrel is free floating up to a point roughly an inch from the...
The trigger is fully adjustable by the slot screw highlighted here. The rifle’s trigger was tuned to 2 pounds and broke without a hint of travel.

The MVP is sold as a package with a 4-15x 50mm scope and bipod.

This innovative cartridge pusher slides cartridges from the magazine into the chamber.

The stock’s forend, where there is a third bedding point. On both sides of the forearm, three panels of stippling are separated with ribbons and finished off with an M in the center section.

From the barrel nut back, the stock tapers inward toward the recoil pad. The pistol grip has a nearly vertical sweep to it, perfect for those who like prone shooting. There is a palm swell for right-hand shooters, and stippling decorates both sides with a classy border and ribbons. Behind the pistol grip, the stock is dished out for a better grip on the rifle and buttstock; a mild rendition of a cheekpiece is on both sides of the stock. The bottom of the buttstock is straight thus allowing a sandbag or other device to be placed along its length in any position. Length of pull is 13 inches, which is right for most average shooters, especially in a bench or prone position. The stock is well finished both inside and out and complimented with a live rubber pad with a black spacer and sling swivels for field carry.

The barrel stamp indicates the rifle is chambered for the 5.56mm NATO, apparently for the generous amount of military ammunition available today. While the .223 Remington and 5.56mm NATO rounds appear identical, the 5.56mm case has thicker walls to handle higher pressures. The most important point, however, is that the lead is different for both cartridges. On the .223 Remington, it has a SAAMI specification of 0.085 inch. On the 5.56mm NATO, the lead is 0.162 inch, about double. In short then, when a 5.56mm NATO round is chambered in a .223 Remington,
The barrel measures a full inch just ahead of the barrel nut. The recoil lug is massive and sits perfectly within the stock forward of the bedding block.

the overall length of the cartridge with the bullet seated could (depending on the manufacturer) contact the rifling prior to being fired. Chamber pressure can increase dramatically, making the danger of a damaged or ruptured case a real possibility. Mossberg has wisely taken the cautious route that allows the safe use of both cartridge lengths.

Leupold's VX-3L 4.5-14x 50mm scope was installed in Warne rings. With its unusual scooped crescent design, I could use the larger 50mm objective lens on this rifle while still mounting it lower.

After sighting in and firing off a box of ammunition, I decided to shoot five-shot groups rather than the customary three shots. Part of the reason being the ambient temperature was around 40 degrees, which helps keep barrel heat at bay, and there was no wind. The other part is that after placing three shots into one hole with the Hornady V-MAX and thinking I could put more in the same spot, I naturally “choked,” and the other two went out to the left; but I soldiered on with five-shot groups.

After looking at the table, it seems...
The best five-shot group measured approximately .75 inch from Winchester Silvertip ammunition.

that the midweights are what this rifle liked. With any of the 50- to 55-grain bullets, groups were an inch or below. Winchester Ballistic Silvertips gave the best accuracy with a .75-inch group. Anything lighter or a bit heavier and groups went over an inch. I might say that this rifle has plenty of potential, for as I progressed through the morning, two out of the five Remington hollowpoints landed in one hole; so I think once you get serious in the handloading department, you are going to have one accurate varmint rifle.

The rifle performed without a flaw. Feeding was right-on without a malfunction of any kind through the AR magazine. Even with a fully loaded magazine, the rounds fed smoothly through the cycle of loading and extraction and finished with the enthusiastic ejection of the cartridges to the right. On the bench, the stock was a pleasure to use. The full grip aided in getting the most precision out of the rifle, not to mention the crisp 2-pound trigger pull. The straight design at the bottom of the buttstock was a great help when using a benchrest. Moving the rifle back and forth on the rear rest afforded more control with less sandbag movement shot to shot. The well-engineered magazine well allowed easy insertion and removal of the magazine, which will be a big help in real field conditions.

While factory ammunition is very accurate, for most of my shooting at longer distances, handloading will certainly pay off with smaller groups. For the dedicated varmint shooter, the Mossberg Varmint Predator is going to be hard to beat with a price point below $700.