

# Six Great Bolt-action Rifles

By Roger Kingsley

Walk in to your favorite hunting gun shop these days and you'll notice that bolt-action rifles far outnumber any other type of rifle action. Not that long ago, pump and lever action firearms held their ground on racks behind the gun shop counter, but no more. In a market loaded with competition, bolt-actions are time-tested rifles that today's manufacturers can build far easier and less expensive than other actions, plus they've been proven to perform with a higher degree of accuracy and reliability.

Classic lever rifles of the past like the Savage Model 99 and the Winchester Model 88 ended their production runs years ago simply because they were too expensive to build. While Winchester still continues its legendary production of the iconic lever-action Model 94, an MSRP of \$1279 kills its appeal to first-time gun buyers when they're lined up beside the much lower priced bolts. And, offering only four old-time chambering's in that model based on nostalgia doesn't help matters.

Introduced in 1948, the Marlin Model 336 lever rifle became a worthy competitor for the Winchester 94, but that Model too eventually reached a stagnant production run from transitions. Sturm, Ruger & Co., the current owner of Marlin through a bankruptcy auction, expects to have the 336 back on the shelves someday soon. But here we go again, don't expect it to carry an average bolt-action price tag. Even the current Browning BLR lever-action—one of my favorites—will set you back around a thousand bucks.

Remington's Model 760, introduced in 1952, was an extremely popular pump-action rifle that hunters sought not only for its quick cycling of clip-fed rounds, but because of its wide range of chambering's. In 1981 it became the Model 7600. Supposedly, this pump-action favorite is still being assembled, but finding a new-in-box model would be the equivalent of finding a whitetail with 180 inches of headgear wandering around your woodlot. And, the price at nearly ten hundred drives rifle hunters to track other options.

To lots of folks, a rifle is just a rifle, but for those who are rifle freaks, they have their own ideas of what they want a rifle to look like or how they want it to handle. Length of pull (LOP) stock configuration, magazine type, barrel length and caliber are the main decision makers that will influence a sale. If purchasing a new rifle is in your future, here's the basic specifications to six of the most affordable, most common bolt-action brands—alphabetically—that you're most apt to see at your local gun shop.

The city of Bergara, Spain has long been known as a place that produces some of the finest guns/barrels in the world, including Bergara rifles. Five words underneath the black Bergara lettering that you'll see in their ads, on their boxes and Owner's Manuals should catch your eye--Our Barrels Make The Difference. That said, Bergara's B-14 Hunter model guarantees groups of 1.0 Minute of Angle (MOA) or less at 100 yards using factory match grade ammunition.

The B-14 Hunter is one sweet looking, fine handling rifle. In 2018, it was awarded NRA's Golden Bullseye Best Rifle honor. The synthetic stock is green with flecks of tan and black, and a SoftTouch coating renders it a tacky feel that makes it very easy to grip. It features a fully adjustable trigger with a range of 2.2 to 4.4 lbs. It's available in nine calibers, and all but the magnum versions will hold four rounds in the hinged floor plate style magazine. The bolts are tight yet super smooth and I especially like the slightly larger bolt knob. The two-position thumb safety functions very quietly if need be. The B-14 Hunter weighs in at over 7 pounds—the heaviest rifle of the six in this article. To me, that's a good thing since felt recoil can—among other things—be tamed by a rifle's weight. Seems like the mentality these days has been leaning toward building lighter rifles. Maybe it's just me, but I'm not a fan. The latest B-14 price tag that I saw on a dealer's shelf was \$699.

Since 1971, CVA has been widely known for their line of muzzleloaders. So it came as a surprise in 2019 when CVA introduced the CASCADE—a bolt-action centerfire rifle. Like the B-14 Hunter and CVA's muzzleloaders, the Cascade is also built and assembled in that same Bergara facility in Spain. CVA sure put some thought into this handsome rifle because it's packed with value despite a low MSRP of \$566 for standard models. Here's what you get: A SoftTouch stock with an extra spacer for an adjustable LOP. A threaded muzzle on a Bergara barrel with not only an accuracy guarantee, but a 14-day money back voucher. A bolt with a fast seventy degree throw that strips cartridges from a flush fit detachable magazine. And, dual front swivel studs accommodate a bipod, plus the receiver comes with two-piece scope bases. There's a choice of ten calibers, and SB (short barrel) series models are also available.

O. F. Mossberg & Sons is the oldest family-owned firearms manufacturer in America, and the world's largest pump-action shotgun manufacturer. Though founded in 1919, Mossberg didn't begin centerfire bolt-action rifle production until the 1960's. Today, their bolt-action Patriot model is—as they say—attractive, accurate and affordable. With an MSRP of \$421, the Patriot is an eye-catcher with plenty of features like a fluted barrel, scope bases, drop-box short-action 5-round magazine, and an adjustable trigger. Configurations can be found in scoped combos, youth models, walnut and synthetic stocks plus cerakoted barrels. Twelve calibers are available and standard bare guns weigh in at 6-1/2 pounds for synthetic models.

One of the most value-priced hunting/sporting bolt rifles to hit the market in the last ten years has been the Ruger American. Its existence since 2012 has been so successful that Ruger has come up with seven variations of stock/barrel models. For an MSRP of \$559, the standard and compact models with black stocks are available in six and four calibers respectively. A bit more money gets you into the green stocked American Predator model with ten calibers. Patented power bedding blocks in the stock provides free-floating barrel accuracy, 70 degree bolt throws assure fast ample scope clearance, flush-fit box magazines hold four rounds, and a trigger system known as the Marksman is fully adjustable.

While I understand the reason for a 3-position safety on some rifles to lock a bolt in place, Ruger did the American a big favor by incorporating a perfectly positioned “tang” safety regardless of its two-stage function. Hooray! Ruger Americans come with a factory installed picatinny scope base, and range in weight from 6 to 6.6 lbs. depending on the specific caliber.

Formed in Utica, NY in 1894, The Savage Repeating Arms Company garnered an interesting history involving patents, government contracts, and acquisitions. Since 1946, its production facility has been a resident of Massachusetts. With a catchphrase BETTER COMES STANDARD, Savage is another leader of hunting rifle innovations. One of its most noted developments in recent years was its 2002 introduction of the Accutrigger—an ingenious user-adjustable trigger that gives owners the ability to set preferred pull weights. The Accutrigger fueled a trend that other manufacturers eventually incorporated into their own rifle lines. Accutrigger is one of the great features of the Savage Axis II, a rifle you’ll surely want to take a look at. At an MSRP of \$479, precision, performance and price certainly defines this particular model. I particularly like the ergonomics of the stock grip for the shooters trigger hand and suspect many others—especially youths and females will likewise. With a variety of configurations and calibers, the Axis II will likely have a model for everyone. My workhorse rifle is a Savage in a discontinued model, but I’d be real pleased if I had to replace the same brand with something in the Axis line. Bare guns weigh in at 6.3 pounds, flush-fit detachable magazines make for a comfortable one-handed carry, and a handy tang safety gives it the proverbial icing on the cake.

In the world of hunting rifles, the name Winchester has undeniably achieved monumental status. Since 1866, a long, historic timeline of rifle models wound up in the closets and gun cabinets of hunters and shooters. Winchester’s latest is the Model XPR which was introduced in 2015 as an economical alternative to their flagship Model 70—an 85 year old bolt-action star. Current production of the XPR shows more than a dozen variations to suit an individual’s taste. Detachable magazines—though not flush fit—are set up for plenty of calibers which include two short-magnums and the new, much talked about 6.8 Western cartridge. Bolts are very strong with short throws, composite stocks have textured panels for gripping power, and the MOA trigger system supposedly has zero creep. Barrels are button-rifled, free-floating and have a patented corrosion resistant finish called Perma-Cote. MSRP for the XPR is \$569.

If you lined these six bolt action rifles up on a table and eyeballed each one, you’d probably be quick to point to the one that speaks to you. But pick them up, shoulder them, work the bolts, safeties and magazines and I’d bet a box of shells you’d rearranged your top picks. All six of these rifles—regardless of their minor differences—are worthy of blue-ribbons. Best of Show honors are for only you to decide. Just be glad I didn’t complicate the choices by adding the bolt action favorites of Browning, and Benelli, and Howa, and Tikka, and Weatherby, and....