

THE BLACK RIFLE VS. THE BLACK BIRD

By Steve Baughman



This Tactical Responder, built by Barry Bowlds of Metalcraft Specialties, proved to be much more accurate than what the author expected from a semiauto rifle.

“Fast is fine, but accuracy is everything” – Wyatt Earp

The “Black Rifle” or AR-15 as referred to herein, comes in so many variations and different styles these days it can make your head spin. Its popularity is rising among varmint

hunters, as it has some advantages over traditional bolt or lever action guns used for hunting here in the Southeastern United States. Rapid follow-up shots are just plain easier with a semiauto. The woods are thick down here, and average shots at deer and

other game in the category of “vermin” are rarely more than 100 yards unless hunting across wide farming areas or power lines that crisscross the state. We Southerners seldom have an opportunity to shoot out to 300 yards or beyond, as is the case for those living in the wide-open spaces found in the West.

Crow or coyote hunting can be fun and challenging, though, especially with a rifle, and when setting up along tree lines near valley farming fields. Ask any farmer and he’ll tell you the coyote population is increasing in most areas, and the ever-present and pesky crow is something that most farmers like to see fewer of. I must admit that, until recently, I was not a fan of the AR-15 for hunting varmints. Through my ties to law enforcement, I always had a lot of respect for the black rifle, but never felt that they had the inherent accuracy necessary for hunting smaller vermin such as crows at longer distances. These parts are generally referred to as “walking varmint” terri-

tory, so the lighter the gun the better. The black rifle just never seemed to fit into that category, so I thought.

I recently had the opportunity to do an extensive evaluation over several months with a black rifle that has changed the way I think about the AR-15. The rifle is called the Tactical Responder, or TR for short, and is made by Barry Bowlds of Metalcraft Specialties. Metalcraft is not a well-known name like Colt, Bushmaster, or Armalite, but the unit I have been shooting for a while now impresses me, and I have used them all, including those made by the big names in the industry. Barry makes his rifles one at a time; hand fitting each component to create a custom “made to order” rifle to meet one’s particular needs. Barry himself is a shooter, and has an extensive background in rifle craft as well as the shooting sports. Factory guns from the “big names” usually are quite remarkable and of high quality these days, but if you are looking for something that is built to order, Barry certainly can deliver.

I talked with Barry several times before taking delivery of the TR, and also talked to other professional and non-professional shooters who had

been using his products. All contacted were well pleased with his service and the high quality of his products. The AR-15 can be a finicky rifle when it comes to ammunition, and my hopes were to obtain one that would not have to have tailored handloads to make it shoot accurately. Barry explained that when contouring and chambering a barrel blank, often only a couple of thousandths of an inch can make the difference between a gun that shoots sub-moa (minute of angle) or one that does not. Here are a few of his own words related to his background in the shooting and rifle building business:

“Pride in ownership is a reflection on the builder. I take pride in my work, and I am rewarded once my work has been well received by the customer. My interest in firearms has been lifelong. Growing up in a rural area, I started enjoying shooting sports early on. I am an active NRA member, and during my spare time I enjoy hunting, target shooting, and plinking in general. I first became interested in the AR-15 in the ’80s with the introduction of Colt’s A2 Hbar Rifle. During that time I qualified with one at an NRA sanctioned High Power match, and have been hooked on the black rifle

ever since. Time has never allowed me to be a serious High Power Rifle competitor, and although I enjoy visits at the range with my ARs, my true passion is in my shop building up custom configurations of the truly incredible rifle design.

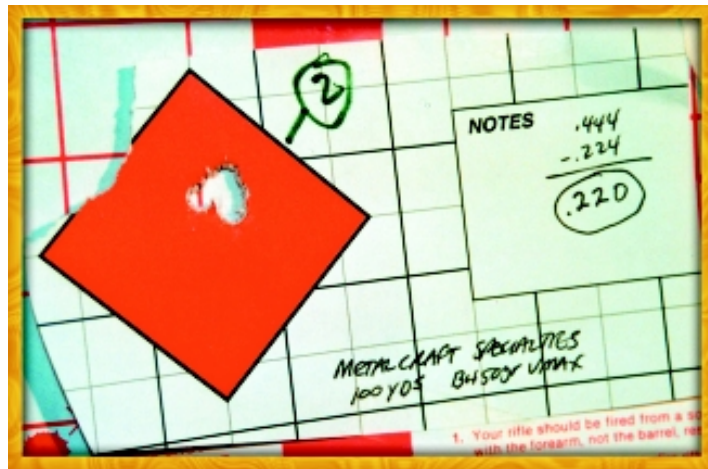
“I feel most at home when I am at the workbench assembling components on a custom rifle or in front of the lathe turning out a true match grade barrel from a precision rifle’s blank. I have an extensive metalworking background and opened my own shop in 1994.

“In the early days of my business I machined custom parts, prototypes, and small production lots for various industries. My goal, however, was to be able to combine my talents in machining with my fascination with firearms, and once my business became established I was able to attain this goal. Since 1998 I have concentrated the efforts of my business on the AR-15 type rifle, with accuracy and performance-enhancing features specifically in mind. My machining procedures are based on experiences learned in tool and die, mold-making, and other close tolerance work with emphasis on precision.

“When contouring and chambering a barrel blank, often only a couple of thousandths of an inch can make the difference between a fair shooting barrel and one capable of sub-moa accuracy. These demanding tolerances require precise setups and attention to detail during machining that can be provided only by a custom gunsmith who is dedicated to his craft. It is with this focus that I strive to deliver a product of superior quality, and provide the AR-15 type rifle enthusiast a custom configured rifle specific to his needs.”

The TR that Metalcraft built for me and the one I have been shooting for several months now is built around an 18-inch Krieger bull barrel. The lower is a PWA built up from a parts kit, and also has a Jewell two-stage trigger installed for precision work. The trigger is another key component necessary for extracting accuracy out of these rifles. The Jewell trigger came adjusted to a 2-pound first-stage and a 1-pound second-stage pull weight. The barrel is made from a 416 stainless steel barrel blank, hand lapped, and cryogenically treated. Krieger rifle barrels are single-point cut, which means that each is made by many passes of a cutting tool, compared with button rifling which cuts all the rifling at one pass. Metalcraft can deliver these units in a variety of barrel lengths. I believe the 18-inch barrel has hit on a compromise configuration as the ultimate length for accuracy, velocity, and ease of “carryability.”

The TR barrel is contoured to a medium bull barrel diameter of 0.812 inch. The twist rate is 1 in 9 inches, and uses the Armalite intermediate gas system, which falls in between the carbine and standard rifle length. I wanted a flat top for mounting a scope down low to the barrel, so my TR sports a standard A3 flat top upper. The upper also con-



This five-shot, 100-yard group measured 0.220 inch, convincing the author that the Tactical Responder rifle definitely could hold its own in the accuracy department when pitted against bolt-action rifles.

sists of the Young’s NM Lite Bolt Carrier, and a Badger Ordnance Tac-Latch, which eases the chambering of live rounds from the magazine, especially with a scope mounted low on the rifle.

Having had the opportunity to shoot this rifle over the course of many months now, I can say that its performance continues to impress me. Accuracy has actually improved since the gun was new, and the rifle has settled in on a factory loading that produces very good accuracy for a carry gun. Performancewise, the gun has never failed to fire, and always ejects empty cases into a small area about 3 feet away and directly to the right of the shooter. The 18-inch barrel is not overly long for negotiating the thick Georgia woods, and also feels right at home when scanning the farm fields looking for crows and coyotes. Even though

the gun wears a heavy barrel, the length allows for quick pointing qualities and a very solid feel. The free-floated barrel and composite hand guard also allow the use of a bipod or sling attachment without worries of changing the bullet's point of impact, whether shooting from the bench or the prone positions.

After initial barrel break-in, the gun showed potential for shooting moa groups consistently, something I have not easily experienced with the AR-15 rifle system before. I experimented with a variety of factory ammunition and finally have found the right combination of bullet weight and brand that allows the gun to shoot sub-moa consistently as long as the shooter does his or her part. The 50-grain V-Max offering from Black Hills Ammunition just seems to be tailor-made for this gun. The V-Max bullet is ideal for both coyotes and crow, so I ordered up a batch to set back, and dedicate the rifle to this load for hunting and target shooting purposes. I've found that most guns favor one particular brand and/or bullet weight, and once it's determined which loading matches that particular gun, it's best to stick with it. I don't normally reload ammunition, so usu-

ally the best course of action is to order up full case lots to ensure that the gun's point of impact will not change from box to box. Production lots of ammunition do vary, so it's best to get a large quantity and stick with it, assuming it shoots in your gun. The U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit uses Black Hills ammo in their guns, so I'm sure if it's good enough for their team, it's good enough for my black rifle and me.

My last outing with the TR at the range produced five five-shot groups averaging 0.513 inch at 100 yards, with the smallest group measuring 0.220 inch. That is the smallest group I've ever shot with any gun at 100 yards. The gun/ammo combination produces muzzle velocities that are averaging around 3,350 fps with this load, and if this accuracy trend keeps up, I'll have to redefine the way I've always thought about bolt guns always outshooting the autos. I don't dare define myself as an expert rifleman, as the pistol always has been my tool of choice, but this is one black rifle that shoots despite my own inherent limitations. This kind of accuracy is a testament to the combination of craftsmanship of Barry Bowlds' rifle-building ability, and the excellent ammunition available from

Black Hills.

Because of the variety of barrel lengths and other options offered by Metalcraft, those interested in a particular version can mix and match components for their needs. I prefer the shorter-barreled versions for my varminting; however, the longer barrels produce higher velocities, reduced muzzle blast, and shooting comfort when firing from the prone position. Barry will go the extra mile to provide superb service and will make suggestions to those who are looking for one type of gun with several options. Barry Bowlds is a one-man shop, and tells me he prefers to keep it that way for now. He believes it's necessary to ensure that he produces a quality firearm that will perform as intended and to assure complete customer satisfaction. Obviously, he cannot crank out guns with high volume like the big names, but perhaps that is to his and our advantage.



CONTACT INFORMATION:

Metalcraft Specialties

Barry Bowlds

Website: www.metalcraft-ar15.com