

Ruger's .204: A New Caliber Debuts

By Jon R. Sundra



The author found shooting the .204 to be an entirely pleasant experience. Recoil is 25 percent less than a .223 rifle of the same weight, and one can almost see the holes appear in the target.

The recent introduction of the .204 Ruger has caused quite a stir in the shooting world, not just because it's a new rifle cartridge, but a new caliber. Well ... yes and no. Yes in that it's the first commercial centerfire cartridge of .204" caliber, but it's not the first commercial cartridge in that caliber. Those of you as long in the tooth as I may recall the 5mm Remington Rimfire Magnum of 1969; it too was a .20 caliber that launched its .204" semi-jacketed bullet at 2,100 fps, and as such outperformed the by-then well-entrenched .22 WMR.

At that particular point in time I had just recently started writing full time and can clearly recall testing the only two rifles ever chambered for the round: Remington's Model 591 and 592 bolt actions; the former was "clip" fed, the lat-

ter an under-barrel tubular magazine version of the same rifle. Both guns were far more accurate than any .22 WMR I had owned or tested up to that time. The round also shot flatter and retained energy better than the .22 WMR cartridge, though not enough to significantly increase the effective range, particularly on larger targets like fox and woodchucks.

If memory serves, a box of 5mm ammo cost about 30 cents more per box of 50 than did .22 WMR fodder ... at least at first. Within three years, however, the price of 5mm ammo increased to where it was about \$1.25 more, or around \$4.50 a box. That, and the fact that no other rifle manufacturer chose to chamber for the cartridge, combined to spell the 5mm's doom. Remington discontinued production of the rifles at the end of 1973 after



The .204 (at right) flies in the face of the current trend toward short, squat cases as exemplified by the .223 Winchester Super Short Magnum.

just three years, though ammunition was produced for several years thereafter.

Enter the .204 Ruger, the first commercial centerfire .20 caliber rifle cartridge, and the first to bear the Ruger headstamp — at least the first to make it to the marketplace. Actually, there was a Ruger .30 short magnum about to be launched in 1998 that was killed at the last minute, but not before I had the opportunity to shoot and hunt with it using a Ruger Model 77 MK II rifle and Winchester factory ammunition. But that's another story.

The .204, as developed for Ruger by Hornady Mfg., is the sixth member of the .222 Remington family of cartridges, and the most voluminous of the lot. Essentially, the .204's hull is a .222 Rem. Magnum case "improved" to the max. By that,



Unlike other No. 1s, the 1-V comes with scope mount blocks instead of a quarter rib. For testing, the author mounted a Nikon Monarch UCC 6.5-20x40 scope.

I mean it has an absolute minimum body taper; the shoulder has been pushed forward and its angle increased to where its body length (powder capacity) is maximized, leaving just enough brass left over to form the recommended neck length of one caliber. In short, you just can't do any more to increase the capacity of the .222 Remington Magnum case beyond what Hornady has done.

It's interesting to note that the .204 is proportionately longer and more slender than a .30-06 case, so its design is really at odds with the new "short and fat" syndrome that's been driving new cartridge development these past several years and which reached its zenith with Winchester's Super Short Magnums. It's really quite a dramatic contrast to see the .204 next to the .22 WSSM. It's like Long Tall Sally meets John Candy.

Because we're talking a relative tiny case to begin with, all the aforementioned machinations Hornady has done to the .222 Magnum case yielded a volumetric increase of only 2 grains of water by weight over the .222 Magnum, and about 3.5 grains more than the .223 Rem. Nevertheless, it's enough to push the little jewel-like 32-grain Hornady V-Max polymer-tipped bullet to 4,225 fps, making it the speediest commercial cartridge on the planet. Hornady also will be offering a 40-grain load that pushes a longer and even more streamlined boat-tail V-Max slug at 3,900 fps. With its higher Sectional Density and Ballistic Coefficient (.137 and .255, versus .110 and .205, respectively), the 40-grain load comes within 1/2" drop-wise of the 32-grain load at the 400-yard mark, and reduces the initial velocity disparity by about half. It also has 3" less wind deflection at 400. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, production of the 40-grain load was still six to eight weeks away, so all I had for testing purposes was the 32-grain load.



The .222 Remington-based family now numbers six (l. to r.): .221 Fireball, .222 Rem., .17 Rem., .223 Rem., .222 Rem. Mag, and .204 Ruger.

Just so you'll have the pertinent ballistics on hand for comparison sake, the following data taken from the Hornady catalog shows the vital stats for both factory loads using a 200-yard zero, which I believe is too short and doesn't take full advantage of the flat-shooting potential of this cartridge.

I'd zero in at 250 yards (which works out to 1.2" high at 100), and by so doing I'd be -10.4" at 400 yards with the 32-grain load, and -11.15" with the 40-grain. That's a more usable trajectory, I think; one that has the point of impact (POI) never being more than 3" above line-of-sight.

We're sure to see other manufacturers besides Ruger chambering for the .204, perhaps even with mid-2004 rollouts, but for the time being Ruger's the only game in town and they have five players on the roster, three in the Model 77 MK II line, and two in the No. 1 single-shot. The initial batch of test guns numbered a mere 10, so I was happy to get whatever gun the Ruger folks were willing to send my way. As it happened, though, they sent the model I would have requested in the first place had I been given the choice: the No. 1V-BBZ, which is the varmint version of that elegant rifle, rendered in stainless steel and mated to a black laminated stock. As an aside, I think this particular gun shows just how far laminates have come in recent years as far as acceptance by the shooting public is concerned. I mean, who would have thought a decade ago that Ruger would even consider anything but traditional walnut for this equally traditional, conservatively styled rifle?

As it came from the box, the Ruger weighed 9 1/2 lb, which is a half-pound more than the nominal spec, but that's to be expected, considering it's such a tiny hole in such a fat barrel! Like all sightless Rugers, the No. 1-V comes with Ruger's own scope rings, but instead of mounting on the quarter rib that's

present on all other permutations of the No. 1, the varminters come with target-style scope mounting blocks installed.

After mounting a Nikon Monarch 6.5-20x40 scope, the ready-to-go rig weighed 10 lb, 10 oz. Curious as to what the recoil factor would be, I plugged the appropriate parameters required into my Barnes' Ballistic Program, i.e., the weight of bullet, the muzzle velocity, the weight of powder charge in grains, and the weight of gun. Incidentally, the three 32-grain factory loads from which I pulled the bullets showed a charge weight of 30.0 grains of a ball-type powder, which is probably in the same burning-rate ballpark as W-748. Anyway, the program spit out a Recoil Energy figure of 2.27 ft lbs; that's 25 percent less than a .223 Rem. of comparable weight, and 50 percent less than a .22-250.

One of the many reasons I've come to prefer the .223 for prairie rat shooting over more potent .22 centerfires is that recoil is light enough that your field of view doesn't black out momentarily at the shot, so you can be your own spotter and make the necessary hold corrections. I fully expected to be able to see the bullet holes appear in a 100-yard target. I also expected – in light of the No. 1-V's 26" barrel – to get the claimed 4,225 fps and then some. Both the foregoing expectations were fulfilled.

Conditions at the range were quite benign; what little breeze there was was coming right into my chops, so no problem there. After bore sighting the Ruger to get it on paper, the first five shots fired for group measured 0.830" ... and it turned out to be the largest of nine groups fired that morning! Normally when testing a heavy-barreled gun, I'll fire my groups as fast as I can, because that's what the action can be like on a good rat town. What good is a fat barrel if it can't even hold zero for five shots in quick succession without stringing? Obviously, with groups that small, there was no tendency to string whatsoever. After each group I



As loaded by Hornady, two bullet weights will be offered: a 32-grain flat-based and a 40-grain boat-tail, both of poly-tipped V-Max persuasion.

let the barrel chill out for about six minutes before firing another. The Ruger just kept putting those tiny holes into itty-bitty groups averaging about 0.650", discounting two fliers, neither of which were more than half an inch out of the cluster and easily could have been my fault.

As for velocity, the average of 10 shots over the Oehler 35 was 4,235 instrumental at 15 feet through a barrel 2" longer than standard.

I've since had the Ruger to the range a second time, but conditions were poor compared to my initial outing with the gun. It was chilly and a fairly strong, quartering wind was blowing. My groups during that session opened up to average 0.980" for five five-shot groups, discounting two fliers. All things considered, it's hard to gripe about that kind of performance, Ruger No. 1 or not. And let's face it, No. 1s are not known for benchrest accuracy. Yes they can be accurate, but the chances they'll shoot with a bolt-action is, well, when was the last time you saw someone build an all-out varmint or bench rifle on anything but a bolt action? There's just too many stress and vibra-

tional issues with a falling block that don't exist in a bolt gun where thrust forces are coaxial with the bore. I've owned more than a dozen No. 1s over the years, and probably have tested that many more. Based on that experience, I simply don't expect a No. 1 to shoot either as accurately and/or with the same consistency in POI as I've come to expect of a good bolt gun. Kinda' makes ya' wonder what the typical Model 77-V will do in this caliber!

To sum it all up, I'm sure we can relate to the idea that shooting is fun, but you've gotta admit, some guns are more fun to shoot than others. The .204, especially one weighing close to 11 lb, is really fun to shoot! While there's just enough recoil to make actually seeing your bullet holes appear on a 100-yard target somewhat iffy, it ain't far from being true. As for being able to be your own spotter, there's no doubt there, as you're back on target just as the dust is starting to kick up. I can't wait to get this gun on a rat town this coming July!



VITAL STATISTICS

	Velocity	Energy	Bullet Path	Wind Deflection
	400 yards	400 yards	400 yards	10 mph crosswind
32 gr. @ 4,225 fps	2,235	355 ft-lbs	-13.4"	19.3"
40 gr. @ 3,900 fps	2,335	485 ft-lbs	-13.9"	16.3"