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Ruger .204: Field Test – First Look

By L.P. Brezny

The Kimber .204 Ruger rifle in Model 84M and Classic stock, equipped with a Leupold scope. This combination can't be beat when it comes to field performance results.

The .204 Ruger – the new kid on the varmint hunters' block. This cartridge developed from a cooperative venture between Hornady and Ruger.

It was a cool, clear, sun-drenched morning with no wind as I closed the bolt on the Ruger MK II heavy target/varmint rifle. Chambered in the rifle's action was a cartridge that resembled a .223 Remington, but contained a 32-grain .20 caliber bullet, a case about 0.089" longer, and delivered a whopping velocity of 4,225 fps at the muzzle. This was indeed not a .223 Remington, and in fact you could just about say the cartridge was a whole new direction in the development of high performance varmint cartridges.

Now, with the Nikon varmint scope centered on a set of Caldwell Insta-View targets at 100 yards, I touched off a round. The bullet seemed to impact at once, covering the 100-yard distance as if the target had been at point blank range. Instantly the Caldwell target registered a bright yellow rough hole against the flat black background. The shot had been about half an inch to the left, and a bit high. Settling down on the bags, I sent a fresh round from the Hornady-marked box of factory ammo into the chamber and again squeezed a few pounds off the Ruger's trigger. With a sharp crack followed by such low recoil that I could watch the bullet print at the indicated range, the second bullet pierced a yellow hole that touched the first bullet impact point. Cold barrel accuracy was outstanding, and I was just hoping my third shot would not blow the whole thing because I was thinking of a photo shot about now. However, with the third round down range my impact point came in directly under the first bullet and also touched its yellow ring on the target backer. In effect I had a three-shot group that measured 0.279", which told me that the Hornady loads in the Ruger .204 were not only hot varmint fodder, but were accurate as well.

With a good group on paper and knowing where the test rifle shot, I switched to the 220-meter regulation steel targets on the test range. These targets were about 6 inches in size and were mounted at ground level to resemble woodchucks and the like. Even with the wind starting to kick up a bit as the sun warmed the wet Quincy, Illinois, farmland, I held dead on and proceeded to clean off 10 straight steel target plates, noticing the hard smack the bullet produced as it slammed into the half-inch steel at a remaining velocity of 3,114 fps. I was right at home with the .204 Ruger and proceeded to cut 100-yard groups and dust off a second, then a third series of steel plates at longer range. With a Hornady engineer standing over me retrieving the spent brass and repacking it as he made his way back to the vehicle, which was something I had never observed before, I realized this cartridge was so new even the manufacturer was gleaning brass. I wrapped up my shooting, then passed off the rifle to the next lucky gun writer.

Field Time, Or Real Time

The author fired the Ruger MKII in .204 Ruger during the first test shooting at PASA Park, Illinois. The Ruger MKII rifle and ammunition shot well, producing sub MOA groups to 100 yards, and solid accuracy to 200 meters on the longer range rifle course.

Except for some general discussion back at the clubhouse toward the end of the test session, the .204 Ruger was to remain somewhat dormant for about two more weeks. Then I had a plane ride to Kansas where an appointment with Dwight Van Brunt of Kimber rifles on a ranch in the western part of the state was to add a second major dimension to the .204 experience. Kimber had produced one of the first rifles outside Ruger chambered in .204, and was making it a part of a major prairie dog hunt to showcase the new, second generation Kimber 84M rifle, along with the Hornady Manufacturing Company .204 Ruger cartridge, in an actual field shooting situation.

Shooting the 84M back in South Dakota for most of the previous year (chambered in .22-250 Remington) and taking part in the same Kansas prairie dog hunt a year prior to this event with the 84M, I had a good working handle on the operation of the Kimber rifle as presented in their "Long-master" design. The new .204 Ruger rifle, however, had a 2-inch shorter barrel and a three-position safety. Add the fact that the bore was .20 caliber and the cartridge was this hot, new, real fast mover, and I was chomping at the bit to get rounds downrange with the Longmaster.

Why chop the barrel, you're thinking. Because the .204 cartridge burns off its fuel faster than, say, the .22-250 Remington, and as such is not in need of so much barrel. Because the rifle I used was a prototype, I can't say that the final production rifle will retain everything found on the refined Pro Varmint style M84, but I do believe that this rifle will be offered in both the Kimber Classic and Pro Varmint series, which should cover the bases in terms of most shooters' tastes.

Fitted with a Leupold bench rest/varmint scope with elevation graduations on the reticle, Kimber's 84M is a class act in terms of getting 32-grain .204 bullets on prairie dogs at long range. This was no 100-yard or even a 200-yard shooter, and I was determined to push it to the limit. Plus, I also wanted to watch the other members of the shooting team stretch the effectiveness of this brand new varmint hunter's tool.

With a proper half-inch above dead center bullet impact at 100 yards, the zero prior to taking the rifle afield was close to dead on at 200 yards. This gave the .204 with the 32-grain bullet hold-on accuracy to 325 yards, and a high hold on a full size adult prairie dog to 400 yards. Hornady had been good enough to send me a ballistic analysis of the 32-grain V-Max bullet, as well as the 40-grain bullet. Also, I had computer generated ballistics from SHOTdata Systems of New Brighton, Minnesota. They ran selected velocity scenarios for me that will be covered a bit later. In effect, I had a good idea of what this fast mover was all about long before I touched off the first round on a prairie dog in a Kansas dog town.

As the first shooter of the day with the .204, free-lance writer Stanley Trzoniec got over the bags and proceeded to send rounds out to a dog at a solid 300 yards. Stan was not having a great deal of luck, as bullets were sliding both high and left because of some tricky wind direction changes across the narrow Kansas prairie draw. After several attempts, Stan did land a bullet atop the critter.

According to Hornady's ballistic data base, the 32-grain bullet would drift off target 10.1 inches with the wind we had, or better than a full dog to one side or another. Add the fact that winds were blowing in an ever-changing pattern across the sharply rolling hills, and prairie dog shooting quickly got quite complicated.

Now it was my turn for some time with the Kimber 84M and its slick receiver. My first target was a dog at 200 yards, sitting on a rise with a solid earth backstop. Wind would not be much of a problem because it was at my back. With a very crisp 2.5 lbs squeezed off the Kimber's trigger, the rifle cracked. At once I was greeted in my Leupold scope with a rolling bullet-grazed dog that was sending dust in all directions. I had over-controlled the trigger and gotten off a premature firing pin drop. As a result, I almost missed the dog.

As on the rifle range a couple of weeks earlier, what impressed me the most here in the field was that I could watch everything unfold downrange because of the total lack of felt or observed recoil with the 32-grain bullet (with an estimated weight of 7.5 lbs for the scoped rifle). Walking a bullet in at long range when winds were down was easy, and no spotter was required much

of the time except for calling out the range to a distant dog.

Wringing Out The Details

While I was pleased with the performance of the new .204 Ruger, I did question one area. That dealt with its comparative performance against the .223 Remington in a Hornady V-Max 40-grain loading. At the time we shot, the third team member of our little group was Bill Bynum, editor for the Cabela's outdoor publication. Bill had gone crazy over the new Kimber Classic introduction in .223 Remington, and had spent a large part of the day shooting that choice in rifle and cartridge. At one point during a setup covering a deep valley, both Bill and Stan were shooting at a small group of dogs about 300 yards downrange. The bullets were impacting an area that was bone dry, and large clouds of dust billowed off the hill every time a bullet slapped the earth. Bill and Stan both fired at exactly the same time once, and I could have sworn I could see a dead even impact by both rifles. In other words, the 40-grain bullet in the .223 Remington was running right with the 32-grain .204 Ruger.

After some discussion it was decided to have Bill set his stopwatch that could pick up some tight time increments, then have Dwight touch off a round with the .223 Remington as Bill measured the flight time to the hillside. After that, Dwight would turn to the .204 Ruger and do likewise. Now, being in the ballistic measurement business, I'm fully aware that this is not a very scientific method of testing paired bullets, but it would at least give us a very basic field understanding of what we were dealing with. Sure enough, according to Bill's watch, the .223 Remington with the 40-grain V-Max load was not only as fast as the .204 Ruger 32-grain V-Max bullet, but seemed to be even a bit faster after several measurements were recorded against the dusty Kansas hillside.

Taking this information back to my office, I called SHOTdata System and asked Ross Metzger to run the 40-grain .223 bullet (.22 caliber) and the .20 caliber .204 Ruger bullets (both in V-Max configuration at an even 4,000 fps), then print out the downrange figures. Here the .20 caliber Ruger crossed the 300-yard mark at 2,526 fps, while the 40-grain .224 caliber bullet crossed the mark at 2,464 fps. The .224 caliber bullet showed a loss of 62 fps against the .204 Ruger bullet.

When checking the data offered by Hornady regarding the .204 Ruger 40-grain bullet at a muzzle velocity of 3,900 fps, the bullet crosses the 300-yard mark at 2,755 fps, or 291 fps faster than the .224 caliber bullet launched at 4,000 fps. Now the smaller diameter, high ballistic coefficient (BC) .204 Ruger in a bit heavier bullet was outrunning the .22 caliber bullet by a wide margin. The BC for the .204 Ruger Hornady V-Max, according to SHOTdata, is 0.2100, and the .223 Remington is 0.2000. In terms of separating pure fact from fiction, I doubt any prairie dog would know the difference between hits from either bullet. These data show that we can put to rest any case being made in the future that the .204 Ruger is a sick sister compared with existing varmint cartridges.

A new fur hunter cartridge?

While it is very early in the game to make a positive conclusion about this cartridge's ability to hold fur together for the market, there was some discussion regarding the possibility that the .204 indeed could be the new kid on the pelt hunter's block. I for one tend to search for bullets that don't exit because I do hunt for fur, not just kills afield. While a broad range of new cartridges may lay claim to being fur hunter cartridges, it takes heavy hitting bullets to drop big Eastern coyotes and Texas bobcats with one clean shot. Most of the so-called lightweights are not fur shooters, in my estimation. When we hear of a light .17 caliber taking a large critter, I consider it a stunt and little more. While others may or may not agree, that's how I see the subject.

With a small, fast bullet like the V-Max design which retains a deadly track record as a fur stopper in a wide range of varmint cartridges, its application as a .204 Ruger/.20 caliber bullet not only makes good sense, but I believe could prove to be a very popular choice among cold weather coyote hunters. That's food for thought, and work for a future story down the line.

Bench Rest Target Results at 100 yards

Three-Shot Groups

Ruger MK II / .204 Ruger
Hornady 32-grain V-Max
Target: 4" Caldwell Insta-View

No. 1	0.897"
No. 2	1.182"
No. 3	0.587"
No. 4	0.279"
No. 5	0.927"

(Very Hot Barrel)
(After a round of 220 meter steel targets)

No. 1	1.257
No. 2	1.649
No. 3	1.526

More Offerings

As of this writing, Remington has indicated to me that they will offer the Light Varmint LT stainless steel sporter in .204 Ruger as soon as they can get them barreled and chambered. Also from a bolt-action manufacturer, the CZ 527 will be offered in both a varmint weight heavy barrel rifle and a field carry lightweight sporter chambered in the .204 cartridge.

In the autoloading department, Les Baer, the custom builder of AR-style rifles will chamber one of his outstanding custom Pro Varmint ARs in .204 Ruger. Without question many other rifles will follow, but for now it is a great start for this hot new fast mover in varmint cartridges.